



Sexuality as a Subversive Force in Erica Jong's *Fear of Dying*

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Abstract— Women have been marginalized and pushed to the periphery of the society all these years. They are marginalized in terms of gender and sexuality. They were confined to private sphere and was restricted from participating in the public sphere or mainstream society. There was no representation of women in the mainstream history. With the passage of time, women started to claim their rights. They started deconstructing the popular notion of mainstream history in order to provide equal space for women. Erica Jong in *Fear of Dying* also displays the anxiety of ageing in a woman's perspective. Through the work, the author unsettles the notion of fear towards ageing and death. Erica Jong in *Fear of Dying* is trying to give women an authoritative and rational voice by challenging the patriarchal rules. Vanessa, a 60 year old actress in the story, reflects the condition of women and challenges the patriarchal rules. The novel explicitly represents those activities and lifestyles which helps women to move from passive agents to active agents. Through Vanessa, Jong exhorts women to move out of existing patriarchal system and discover their identity as separate from male defined identity of women.

Keywords— Anxiety, Ageing, Erica Jong, Fear of Dying, Lifestyle, Subversion, Sexuality, Patriarchal institutions.



I. INTRODUCTION

Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* speaks about the “patriarchal government to be the institution whereby half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male” (25). According to her, patriarchal institutions like family, marriage, religion, and sexuality consolidate patriarchy. The patriarchal rules are imposed on women through these patriarchal institutions to suppress them. Patriarchal families follow a triad structure wherein men are the head of the family. Even in marriages, men are dominant and have the right to choose their partners. In many countries and states, the choice of women in choosing their life partner is neglected. Religion is one of the other patriarchal institutions where women are being suppressed. Simon de Beauvoir asserts in her work *Second Sex* that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a Woman” (295). She states that a binary system always exists in our society and the system is the invention of the patriarchy which in turn becomes the main reason

for the subordination of women. The system always considers women as the “Other”, passive and docile agents to promote male authority. They define women not in terms of themselves but relative to men: “He is the Subject, the Absolute, she is the Other” (16). So woman is considered not only as a social construct but also as a less valuable category than man. Beauvoir says that women rarely strive to become subjects; they are economically and psychologically bound to their oppression.

Frederick Engles argues that in contemporary society the position of women is similar to that of proletariat. Male dominated society assigns productive labour to man and non – productive and reproductive labour to women and confine them in the private sphere by restricting them in participating in the public life. Thus, it becomes another reason for the subordination of women.

One of the other major forms of oppression is through language. Virginia Woolf in her work *A Room of One's*

Own expresses that when women wanted to inscribe her own experiences she could observe there is “no common sentence ready for use.”(64) Women are denied to access the public language as the public speech is male privilege. In order to express their real self, women use androcentric language which is not sufficient to express themselves. Helene Cixous, in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” speaks about language and sexuality. She argues that women have been restricted from writing as they were chased away from their bodies and desires. She says that “men committed the greatest crime against women” (115). They made “women to hate themselves and to be their own enemies” (115). Cixous argues that men have written history and continued to control women’s narratives.

Since women are bound to the oppression of men over the years, they developed a tendency to subvert the patriarchal rules and norms which controlled them. As a resistance to their oppression, they started to undermine the patriarchal institutions by not adhering to conventional practices. In regard to subversion, women try to deconstruct the popular notion of mainstream history. Their goal is to deconstruct history to incorporate and rehabilitate women fully into the public space of industry, commerce, education, and political office. Even the long oppression faced by women also resulted in the invention of gynocentric system of language of self – expression. The novel *Fear of Dying* endeavours to destabilize the patriarchal institutions like Marriage, Family, Heterosexuality, Religion, etc. in various ways.

II. FEAR OF DYING: AN OVERVIEW

Fear of Dying written by Erica Jong is one of the works which belongs to her Fear Trilogy. It is a sequel to *Fear of Flying*. Both the works presents the truth of Jong’s experiences and the experiences of women like her. The novel is divided into chronologica seasons: Fall, Winter, Spring, Summer which implies the experiences and emotions that she goes through in her life. Through the name of the novel Jong gives an impression to the readers about the vast changes that happen in the women’s lives as they grow old and face their mortality, a deep analysis of the text provides a clear picture of the writers’ intention in writing the novel. Through the work, Jong demonstrates those instances and lifestyles performed by the characters as a resistance to the oppression faced by the women in a male dominated society.

Fear of Dying by Erica Jong is a beautiful story about what happens when one woman steps reluctantly into the afternoon of life. Vanessa Wonderman, a 60-year-old actress, is surrounded by her dying parents, her aging husband, and her beloved pregnant daughter. Although she

considers herself a “happily married woman” she lacks sexual satisfaction in her life. So she places an ad on zipless.com, an internet site. She observes that sex will help her to escape from aging. But a series of encounters with men through the internet would lead to her realization that the fantasy will not provide her with the fountain of youth; instead, a genuine relationship will give her the will to face her own mortality.

III. ANXIETY OF AGEING

The various instances illustrated in the novel show Vanessa’s anxiety about aging and death which also implies that the anxiety of aging is more among women than men. Even though the novel includes quotes and examples of the actress’ anxiousness towards aging and death, a deep analysis of the novel would lead us to think from a different perspective. *Fear of Dying* expresses Vanessa’s anxiety on ageing as well as death. Vanessa is depressed because she realises that she has lost all the power over men as she is getting old. She feels despondent and deranged when she thinks that many people who has been part of your life start dying off once they grow old.

Jong also represents the physiological and psychological conditions of the people in their old age. Vanessa speaks about the physical changes of her parents such as greying of hair, wrinkling of skin and so on. Also, they developed diseases of old age and are taken care of by caregivers. Vanessa says that they can no longer the pleasures of life and everything seems boring. The condition of her parents as well as Vanessa at her sixty increases her anxiety of ageing and she visits anti – ageing specialists.

Vanessa in *Fear of Dying* through various instances clearly expresses denial of ageing and mortality. At one point, Jong inform the readers about the society where the people suffer from a constant fear of losing their youth.

IV. SUBVERSION OF PATRIARCHAL INSTITUTIONS

The paper attempts to examine how women subvert patriarchal rules as a resistance to their oppression. It presents different ways through which different women characters in the novel challenge patriarchal norms and practices.

Fear of Dying by Erica Jong is an overt representation of challenging patriarchal norms and practices. Through Vanessa, Jong wants to rewrite the history of women. History, which is the controlled subjectivity of the author, has always been written from a male perspective, giving prominence to what is called “male.” The history manifested by men always degrade women and they are

portrayed as submissive agents. Women are encouraged to confine themselves in private sphere rather than participating in the public sphere. Vanessa says, "I am rewriting history" (454). She wants to rewrite the history of women by giving them equal space as men. The novel also stress on the idea of "feminism" and states that the idea of feminism is to make an unfair world fair. By relying on the feministic idea she also affirms that her intention is not to degrade men. She dreams of a society where the rights of women are respected and considered.

Jong portrays Vanessa and the other women characters of the novel as economically independent women. Vanessa's acting profession shows a paradigm shift from the existing patriarchal system of women remaining in the private sphere to women participating in the public sphere. Moreover, the acting career of Vanessa and Glinda depicts the rising of women in the film industry that was once male-dominated. Their profession brings them to mainstream society where their voice is heard. Vanessa in the novel, speaks about the various roles done by her that support and strengthens the dignity of women. The character of Blair in *Blair's World* by Vanessa was against all the conventional norms followed by women in society and received appreciation from all over the world. "The character of Blair in *Blair's World* is the one that has clung to me. Blair was the original scheming Bitch – a woman who married again and again and got richer with every divorce." (860) Jong mentions those roles done by Vanessa which motivates women to express themselves and to be active agents rather than being docile and confined to four walls. Laura Mulvey, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" discusses the objectification of women. She says that women characters in movies are traditionally constructed as erotic objects. The women are represented as something to be controlled and possessed by male characters in narrative films (806-815) Jong in *Fear of Dying* portrays women characters who do powerful roles in their films and not merely like objects for men's pleasure. The character Blair performed by Vanessa shows a different perspective to the women in the world that strengthens them. Even when Vanessa visited India, some Indian women said that the character of Blair made the women strong and permitted them to be "ourselves."

Also, there are also instances in the novel where Vanessa tries to make roles gender blind. The drama staged during Elizabethan age never gave space for women. Even women characters were done by men. The novel shows the reversal of the Elizabethan roles. Vanessa wishes to make movies by reversing the roles of Elizabethan drama. She expresses her desire to do the major roles of the Elizabethan age from women's perspective: I wanted to

play King Lear as a woman... I wanted to play Macbeth as a woman... I wanted to do a female Hamlet. (1824) These examples in the text shows that Vanessa's profession as an actress was never confined. She has done those roles which liberates women from themselves and from the barriers imposed on them by the society. Also, the novel juxtaposes male and female roles the in society and presents a world where there are no distinctions which separate the two genders. Gender roles assigned by the society is viewed by Jong in *Fear of Dying* with little reverence.

The novel *Fear of Dying* shows the shift from father-centered ideology of parenting to mother-centered ideology. Patriarchal society emphasizes on triad structure of family wherein the father is the head of the family and the mother is a docile agent. Jong throughout tries to undermine this belief. Vanessa, after her divorce, becomes the breadwinner of the family. She becomes both mother and father to her daughter. The triad structure of a family is changed to a dyad structure of family: "When she was little her father walked out, I decided I could be both mother and father to her" (851). Vanessa becoming the sole breadwinner of her family refutes the Western philosophy embedded with Aristotelian view that white middle – class girls are meant to be wives and mothers and are destined to fulfil different and unequal roles.

Patriarchal system always romanticize love and love in such system is always fantasized but Vanessa has different view point about love. She ironically questions: "Wasn't love always an exploding cigar?" (75). She also gives an instance of Fanny Brice saying that "Love is like a card-trick – once you know how it works, it's no fun anymore?" (79). In this context, Millet's observation that romance is an oppressive ideology appropriated by men to enslave women is significant.

Marriage is another institution of a patriarchal society. All religions consider marriage as sacred. Vanessa destabilizes this view by marrying Ralph and by getting divorced. As mentioned in the novel, she finds her marriage as moving from one apartment to another: "We got married and divorced as if we were only moving from one apartment to another" (855).

She questions the legitimization of marriage by religion, which began with capitalism. Vanessa also speaks about ladies whom she met at the Wonderman's parties. The ladies who come to their parties change their husbands as they change "platform shoes." Earlier it was men who actively chose their partners and women were passive in the activities of marriage. But in the novel, it is women characters who choose their life partners. Previously, women considered marriage as sacred across cultures, and

the position of a husband is related to God, whereas the novel shows the decline of these notions related to marriage. Vanessa's extra marital relationship with her friend Nigel Cavendish challenges patriarchy because the patriarchal system never allows a bond outside the marriage for women.

Women undermine patriarchal institutions through sexuality. Adrienne Rich, in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," argues that heterosexuality is not "natural," but it is an institution imposed upon many cultures and societies to subordinate women. She argues that heterosexuality is a violent political institution that paves the way for the "male right of physical, economical and emotional access" to women (1773). Rich claims that heterosexuality is not the choice of women, but it is imposed, managed, organized, propagandized and maintained by society (26). According to Rich, heterosexuality becomes a mandate for women in patriarchy system and male sexuality is imposed on women of patriarchy society through various activities like rape, prostitution, pornography and other cultural practices. They challenge patriarchy by understanding sexuality as pleasure. Women focusing on sexual pleasure reclaim female agency. Women celebrate sexuality by finding sexual partners outside marriage relationship. Women subvert the patriarchal emphasis on chastity, virginity and fidelity to men. Women no longer consider sexuality as private which should not be exposed in the society. Women openly speak about female sexuality. Women express their sexual desire and no longer remain sexually passive or docile. They articulate their sexual identity. Women challenge the sexual objectification of women by men. Patriarchy emphasizes heterosexuality and restricts homosexuality and other forms of sexualities. By subverting patriarchy women challenge heterosexuality and encourage lesbian relationship. Lesbians seek to cultivate the treasure of femininity. Being a lesbian, woman hopes to find self-realization which would help them to find 'herself' in the 'Otherness'.

Jong, through Vanessa in *Fear of Dying*, has subverted the patriarchal concept of considering women as no longer desirable for a sexual relationship when they are old. The male standards define the sexual interest of women as fading away when they become old. Vanessa expressing her sexual desire at the age of sixty is trying to unsettle this point of view. Vanessa demonstrates her desire for a sexual relationship even at sixty in a society where sex is considered only a means for procreation. Acknowledging the fact it is a matter of embarrassment, she gathers the courage to move out of the conventional practice. The novel *Fear of Dying* shows the celebration of sexuality. Vanessa has sexual relations with men outside the

marriage. The novel portrays sexuality for pleasure which challenges patriarchy. Vanessa Wonderman, even though a happily married woman, experiences a lack of sexual satisfaction in her relationship. She has placed an ad on zipless.com, a sex site on the internet which she thinks would be a remedy for her problems:

I'm only going to say that when all the troubles of my family of origin engulfed me and I realized that my marriage could not save me, I reached a point where I was just unhinged enough to put the following ad on zipless.com, a sex site on the internet. (83)

Vanessa is searching for love online. She thinks that her online advertisement for sex will give her pleasure in life, which has made her find a strategy that would help her to relax from her family and marriage responsibilities. She believes that sex will assist her in staying young and also considers it an escape from death. She finds sex as a way of escaping from the weariness of the daily routine. She obtains sexual pleasure in different methods by getting involved in plane sex with a chap through the internet. She has sexted plane fantasies with him. As mentioned earlier, the novel is a celebration of sexuality, it not only talks about the heterosexual relationship of characters in the novel. The lesbian relationship of Lindsay, the daughter of Asher Freilich, with her roommate Lulu. The lesbian relationship gives women the freedom and space to nurture each other's qualities and talents, so it becomes a challenge to the patriarchal system.

The novel depicts a different perspective on the miserable condition of widows. Male-dominated society delineates widows and considers them a curse. Even they are not supposed to remarry in some cultures. The widows in a patriarchal society are denied all the pleasures of life after the death of their husbands. Vanessa in *Fear of Dying* distorts the notion by putting forward a new idea to set up a sex shop for widows where they can fulfill their sexual needs:

If I were more entrepreneurial, I would set shop for widows – someplace they could come, get their needs swiftly taken care of by young studs, and then move on to their grandparently duties, professional duties, filial duties. (1105)

Fear of Dying unsettles the patriarchal notion of women remaining chaste or virgin. Women are not supposed to "break her virgin - knot" before their marriage in the patriarchal system. But in the novel, Vanessa shares her experience of involving in pre-marital sex with Lep Kahn. Abortion is not allowed in patriarchal societies, and also religions consider abortion a taboo. Vanessa subverts this view by indulging in pre-marital sex with Leporello Kahn, a chief Broadway producer, and she gets pregnant. She

speaks about the abortion that she underwent at the age of sixteen: Without Lep Kahn, would I have had an abortion at sixteen, quit school in seventeen, moved to the village. (411)

Not only that, Vanessa is against the people who consider abortion evil. Instead, she argues that it is the right of women to terminate the unwanted pregnancy. She shows her hatred towards religion and society that speak against abortion: I was sitting in my hospital room watching a right – wing politician and a Catholic priest going on about the evils of abortion, and I threw the apple from my lunch tray right at the TV screen. (680)

Jong in *Fear of Dying* brings out a radical feminist claim. Vanessa considers reproduction a need of society that contradicts the popular notion of reproduction where women think it can fulfill their lives. She endorses the Radical feminist view of reproductive sexuality. In her opinion, women can liberate themselves and gain equality only by separating the reproduction function because the reproductive qualities of women are one of the reasons for their subordination. She thinks that by separating women from their reproductive qualities, they would enjoy equal status with men in the private and public spheres. She supports the view of Aldous Huxley who said that women can gain success in being equal only when they have separated themselves from reproduction functions:

I think Aldous Huxley was right about reproduction in *Brave New World*. Until we could “decant” sperm and egg separate from partners, we’d never have equality. Men were too territorial and violent. But detach reproduction from human relationships and you might have a chance. (2146)

Vanessa’s observation is unmistakably the Radical feminist view of the reproductive function like bearing and rearing of children.

Fear of Dying undermines the institutions of society that subordinate women and their rights. Patriarchy often colludes with women to perpetuate male domination and female subordination. Religion is one of the institutions of society that subordinates women through ritualistic practices. Religion perpetuates unequal status for women. The novel challenges the patriarchal religion by not following the rituals and customs of religion. It is evident that Vanessa is neither a true believer in God nor has any religious knowledge. She is against all ritualistic practices and considers those as interventions of men. She thinks of rituals as silly and absurd stuff. Vanessa expresses her grudge against the ritual of circumcision. She opposes these rituals and says that only the “grandpas” emphasize these rituals: It’s the health of the old impotent grandpa’s they’re thinking of you, not little boy...it’s the grandpas

who love this ritual. (2249) The novel depicts the distrust of women on ritualistic practices imposed by patriarchal religion. The rituals, which inflict pain and subordinate them, lead to the loss of belief in the God and religion.

Besides, Jong explicitly presents certain instances and lifestyles followed by the characters that challenge the patriarchal system of society. As the novel progresses, Vanessa speaks about an interesting encounter with a personal slave:

I do whatever you need – from housecleaning to sex to shopping...It’s my pleasure to serve you and all those you instruct me to. I will wear whatever uniforms you need me to, work whatever hours, never ask for a thing in return. I will wear rocks in my shoes for penance if you need me to, sleep in the kitchen behind the garbage, peel potatoes and live on the raw skins. (1585)

In a male-dominated society, women are often considered slaves of men who do all the domestic work. Women do every kind of work but their work never gets any recognition. But, *Fear of Dying* depicts men as personal slaves, and neither the work is valued. The men who humiliated women over these years are humiliating themselves which welcomes a change in society. The male-dominated society is gradually changing to a woman-oriented society. The personal slave does the monotonous work which was once done by women. This is an ironic representation done by the author to mock the age-old convention of treating women as slaves who are only expected to do domestic chores. Vanessa Wonderman also speaks about her living relationship with a young actor Asher Freileich who is young enough to be her son. Living relationships are not encouraged in a male-dominated society as it is a threat to male supremacy.

Jong in *Fear of Dying* portrays the mother-daughter bond and represents the sisterhood relationship, which is not favourable for a male-dominated society as the existence of male supremacy rests on the division of these relationships. According to patriarchal conventions, a mother takes pride in their sons as they believe their sons shall enjoy the power which restricts them. But the novel *Fear of Dying* recognizes the mother-daughter bond shared by Vanessa and Glinda. Vanessa identifies herself with her daughter Glinda. She considers her daughter Glinda a blessing and also reiterates that Glinda is her future and thinks that she has done everything for her to lead a happy life. Vanessa supports Glinda even when she is addicted to alcohol. She gives courage to Glinda during her pregnancy and wishes that her daughter should not undergo the pain that she once faced. She brings up her daughter by exposing her to the public sphere and not confining her to the four walls of domesticity. She supports Glinda at every

point of her life. Vanessa gives freedom to Glinda and never restricts her daughter from doing anything that society teaches as “don’t’s.” She nurtures her daughter as a woman who is capable enough to challenge the existing norms of society.

The portrayal of the “sisterhood” bond between Vanessa and Isadora is one of the interesting features of *Fear of Dying*. Women bonding with other women is a threat to patriarchal system. Women establish a kind of sisterhood based on female - female relationship. This can act as a fort against male tyranny and cultivate in women a new sense of community. The sisterhood relationship is different from the patriarchal system of brotherhood. In patriarchy women are not considered equal to men, whereas in sisterhood they form “peer relationship.” Sisterhood like friendship has as its core the affirmation of freedom. It is a relationship of self - affirmation. In “sisterhood” women express themselves emotionally. It give prominence to equality and individuality. The sisterhood establishes a “peer relationship” between women which is denied to them by patriarchy. They express their emotions and share their experiences. The “sisterhood” helps the women to recover their lost self-identity. In the novel, there is a strange friendship between Vanessa and Isadora. Vanessa considers Isadora as her alter ego. They support each other. Isadora gives moral support to Vanessa whenever she needs it:

Isadora and I had been friends forever. We met over a movie that was never made. We even got sober together. And I could call her for moral support whenever I needed her. I thought of her as my BFF, my alter ego. (116)

Isadora is the soul mate of Vanessa. Vanessa trusts her more than any person in her life. They are emotionally attached to each other. Isadora protects her from all dangers. She advises her about the dangers of zipless and her encounter with strangers. They both share their experiences, about sexuality and sexual fantasies.

The lifestyle of the characters in the novel is also a challenge to patriarchy. The women characters in the novel are addicted to alcohol due to their free lifestyle. Generally, men are addicted to alcohol, drug and so on and women are not exposed to such things in patriarchal society. This point of view is altered in the novel. Vanessa uses alcohol and her daughter is addicted to drugs and alcohol. Glinda becomes addict to drug and alcohol and later she is taken to rehabilitation center where she undergoes detoxification. When women indulge in such activities which are considered masculine society terms them as blasphemy.

Jong in *Fear of Dying* convey her thoughts on everything from palliative care, to plastic surgery, to circumcision, to

canine companions. It explores the theme of mortality as an older actress contemplates her life, sex and the loss of her parents. The novel is a confessional treatise on the terror of growing old and the lifestyles which she has adopted because of the anxiety of ageing. The novel represents the author’s preoccupation with the complexities of female desire along with the anxiety of death.

V. CONCLUSION

The novel *Fear of Dying* written by Erica Jong is an example of subversion of the patriarchal ideology that artistic creation as a quality of males. Jong through this novel provides a literary model for the women to follow so that women can overcome the anxiety of authorship. Also, the novel can be considered as a powerful weapon against the patriarchal constructions of femininity and stereotyping of women. The text can also be considered as a realization of their sexuality, womanly being and their experiences.

Helene Cixous in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” speaks about the relation language and sexuality. She states that women should not remain passive and they should write to liberate themselves. She argues that “woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have driven away from as violently as from their bodies...woman must put herself into text – as into the world and into history – by movement” (112). As Helen Cixous stated in her essay, *Fear of Dying* is an overt representation of those activities and life styles which destabilizes the patriarchal norms of the society. When women resist patriarchy they are changed from passive victims to active agents. The novel consists of various instances where the women characters with their lifestyles undermines the institutions imposed by patriarchy like marriage, religion, family, heterosexuality and the limitation of women in the private sphere. It is a celebration of female sexuality and depicts the portrayal of women as independent individuals. Jong employs gynocentric language to construct their own identity which is distinct from the male defined identity. Rather than using androcentric language, Jong uses a gynocentric language which inscribe femininity. Additionally, *Fear of Dying* is trying to deconstruct the popular notions of the mainstream society and strive to claim the rights of the women which is denied to them. The women characters portrayed in the novel actively participate in all the horizons of the society from where they are restricted and tries to be an active participant of the mainstream society rather than staying at the periphery of the society. When women resist patriarchy they are changed from passive victims to active agents. In the novel, female resistance is

pervasive in all ways of life. Thus, the novel presents a group of active agents who constitute the women characters in the novel. In the novel, the women characters challenge almost everything which patriarchy constructs such as religion, marriage, family, heterosexuality, and limitation of women to private sphere. The novel celebrates female sexuality and portrays women as independent individuals. Thus, the novel diminishes all the constraints imposed on women by men. Therefore the novel is a brave attempt to subvert all patriarchal institutions and the phallogocentric structure of society.

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