



# Patriarchy and Feminism are always at loggerheads for Identity & Primacy: A study through the fictions of Anita Desai

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**Abstract**— *The construction of gender is not an overnight formation, rather a continuous process intimately connected to other historical developments in society for generations. Feminist scholars, writers, and researchers have consistently insisted on percolating the message that "Gender is a social construct" because, the general image of women as docile, lovable, simple, and weak, creates the ground for exploitation, and denies its rightful place in society by the patriarchal determination. This is the reason; many feminist writers raise the subject of female identities, in order to give women a sense of belongingness in their fictional works. This paper examines cultural and other potential factors of gender construction in the society, as a contributing element for isolation and loss of identity of Women in a family through select works of Anita Desai. It also looks at gender relations globally; the socio-psychological compulsions while highlighting the fact, that men and women have rigidly defined roles as well as a range of social and moral obligations attached to these gender roles, which requires to be adhered to.*

**Keywords**— *Feminism, Patriarchy, Tradition, Gender roles, Identity, Primacy.*

Today, in the 21st century, this may appear as strange and an unfounded reality to discuss, on the subject of patriarchy; given the spectacle of the representation of women in every walk of life, which is not confined to mere representation rather as the leaders in their respective fields, and at places leaves no room for their male counterparts, they too are unique on their own rights of excellence and achievements. Although it becomes hard to believe that - patriarchy can ever be an obstacle on the way of rights and liberties of women. If we are to believe this argument, then we need to trace it back to the history of Patriarchy, if any such history or precedence is available to be believed or relied upon, and further- if no such concepts are there then 'Feminism' itself, loses ground as a result of opposition to patriarchy. Finally, if patriarchy is real then whether it is a natural gender construct and good for the society, or a mere psycho-social construct against which Feminism had to surface as a form of revolt?. The question

continues unanswered decades after decades and for centuries.

Opinions differ on multiple grounds, for some, the very idea of patriarchy is too obsolete to count on, and should be best forgotten as a practice, in such a case, they don't deny the fact that such a practice ever existed and has a history behind. For some other critics, it is the brutal force of 'Men' that has undermined the position of 'women' as a vital entity of the society. Further, some modern advocates of 'Feminism' argue that Men have caused women to suffer in every sphere of life, be it industry, agriculture, athletics, film, politics, or academics, to add some out of many fields. They are surprisingly silent on the fact that - If men are to be blamed for their non-performance or failure to grab the limelight, their rise to the current position in the society probably, should not have happened without the support of the same brutal force as they call, and hence credit should equally go to men and not otherwise.

In recent times, "patriarchy" as an idea is considered to be not something a right-wing man would even remotely wish to believe in, let alone to dilate upon for some apocalyptic relish. It is rather, if uttered without irony, shall lead to be understood as a very particular type of person by an iron-clad feminist of the old school, even though, the ossified leftist who complained vehemently about the evils of capitalism as well as the feminist theorists, have long given off the idea far behind.

When we look at the spectacle and the precedence of events worldwide, we do notice the echoes of similar attributes of man-woman relationship, familiar or social, that surprises any sensible theorist to conclude that- the general perception towards women had never been fair and equitable across cultures and religious beliefs. Women have been dealt with as second rate citizens. To validate this, some examples can be cited here. To begin with, Chinese history that ranges back to the thirteenth century introduced a change in marriage and property laws in China that deprived women of their property rights and reduced their legal and economic autonomy. As per Confucian ideals, the Mongol occupation created a replacement constellation of property and gender relations that persisted until the end of the imperial era. This shows how the Mongol-Yuan rule in China typically created the conditions for radical changes within the law, which curtailed women's financial and individual autonomy.

Vedas and related texts glorify the status of womanhood in every possible way, which is highly respectful and encouraging to note their status in society. It'll be certainly no exaggeration to mention that amongst all the religious philosophies within the world, only the 'Vedas' consider women as superior to men. If we compare the status of the fair sex in Christianity, they certainly do not consider women to be even equal to men. Most of the readers may tend to doubt that or probably raise questions - why the condition of women was so downtrodden and trampled across ages and in different social frameworks. In India, we do notice the subordination of women as a clear feature at certain stages of the recorded history, as it had been prevalent in most parts of the planet. Women's subordination was conditioned by the social, economic, historical, and cultural environments during which they were placed. Analysis of gender stratification had proved that there was a historical development in patriarchy and patriarchal institutions which came to be formed and transformed over centuries.

The solution to the present question is that- in the Vedic age; although women enjoyed a respectful status in the entire society; it was during the time of ignorance, when we find the downfall and decline. Most of the objections

about the status of women are associated with the same time of life that validated the *Sati Pratha*, Dowry, Polygamy, Adultery, denial of education to women, child marriage, widow ostracization, etc. These ill practices prevailed during the 'Middle Ages' when people stopped following the instructions of the Vedas. These practices are; let say- the side effects of non-compliance and non-adherence to Vedic Philosophy. So, the fault goes to inaction and ignorance and certainly not to the Vedic Texts. One of the ace Vedic scholars Vivek Arya says:

*Vedas regard women to the highest status in society, resulting in many women became Vedic Seers or Rishikas in the Vedic age. The various suktas of Rigveda like 10 /134, 10/40, 8/91, 10/95,10/107, 10/109, 10/154, 10/159,5/28 were elaborated by female Vedic Seers like Ghosha, Godha, Upanishads, Apala, Vishavavara, Nishat, Romsha, etc. [Arya 2020]*

Not to speak of the Arab Islamic doctrines, which we may call as the doctrine of subjugation under the veil of religious hegemony of a male-male world. Fundamentalists believe that- feminism is a challenge to Islam. It's a plot to uncover, or to get rid of *Hijab/Burkha*, as the prescriptive religious discipline, to allow an open social relation between men and women, or to liberate women from the prescriptive threshold, or to abide by Muslim tenets, and codes of behaviour, limit divorce, outlaw multiple marriages, demand an equal share of the inheritance, and a call to establish Western or irreligious secularism in Muslim countries, and the situation whereby religion would have no role to play in people's private social lives. This clears the air of confusion from our mind that it is more as a matter of dominance and primacy rather than mere religious doctrine against which sporadic voices of resentment surfaces sporadically, and the women activists to some extent have been more vocal about their rights and liberties in recent times, resulting in some positive outcomes in Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and India in recent times.

Never before in modern history has been, as in the past years to note that- "patriarchy" has bloomed in common parlance as popular culture. Once one tunes into it, it's harder to escape out of it: it comes bare on banners and T-shirts; it is an unexpected recent addition to the vocabulary of media debates; it is there in newspaper headlines, explaining everything from the Irish abortion vote, to the incident of murder of a woman in Afganistan, on charges of polygamy or the Toronto van attack allegedly by a violently misogynistic "incel" – a man who believes he has been denied a rightful space to have sexual intimacy with women. Besides the world of Anglophone, the

Spanish '*patriarcado*' the German '*Patriarchat*', the Italian '*patriarcato*', and the French '*patriarcat*' could be different facets of such practices that draw our attention to work out.

Despite the accusation of its widespread misuse, the '*MeToo*' campaign in the recent past did spread at an electrifying speed across the continents, so also the use of "patriarchy". It burst its way out of the attic of half-discarded concepts to greet a moment – as the fourth-wave of feminist ferment – in which there arises an urgent need to name- "what women are still fighting against?." The bigger question is that- if there is a historical, perpetual, or even metaphysical dimension to this type of patriarchy? - However, this question is easier to raise than to answer. While we can easily assert that patriarchy under one of its many conceptions has a history, maybe one of those specific constellations is universal or not; that becomes another question, and decidedly ends up in a goose hunt for finding threads to the universal rules applicable to all these messes.

One of the few grand narratives of patriarchy at times implicitly though, accept the doctrine of Western gender relations, in which a traditional conservatism is followed by the euphoria of emancipation at the advent of liberal feminism and political modernity. This teleological history of women's liberation affirms the traditional authority of patriarchy as a traditional paternal authority in the family. Although it can't be denied, that those who maintain such a distinction, leave too much room for inequalities between. However, to believe the ubiquity or the universality of at least one of the meanings of 'patriarchy' could be that- a society values and prioritizes men over women. Since Power is ubiquitous, it cannot be confined to economic power to validate the concept of "hegemony," because, domination is often achieved through culturally orchestrated consent rather than force. In this case, if we agree to the argument of male dominance, we too tacitly agree that it has been consensual across ages and were never as imposed choices.

One has to agree - that human history is replete with the persistence of male domination and has been very much as a part of life. Surprisingly, patriarchy was never identified as a concept; unlike democracy, autocracy, or oligarchy, and never before, the merits of it were debated seriously. Hence, the notion of male supremacy as "natural" could be self-fulfilling, because those who wrote the laws, the religious books or literature, the philosophy or history, be it medicine or the scientific texts, were primarily men and were devoted to advocating their own cause. As Jane Austen's character Anne Elliot says: "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has

been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands." [Tony 1979] One might argue that- patriarchy's particular power lies in its capacity to make itself as invisible as possible, and it tries very hard not to draw any attention to the means of its endurance.

In this regard, the opinion of Pierre Bourdieu further complicates the matter of the history of patriarchy, he argues that: "one of patriarchy's lasting powers has been its own de-historicizing and its appearance as natural and inevitable." [Pierre 2007] and Interestingly, "... even though a large part of the move to women's and later gender history and feminist philosophy has been to undo this process of de-historicizing, it has not yet led to the 'radical new epistemology' once sought." [Penelope 245] As of now, we can now be certain to agree that 'Patriarchy' carries a fair history behind it and 'Feminism' as a form of revolt for rights and liberties against the idea of supremacy. Now the question is, if gender plays any role in deciding the primacy in family or society? The answer becomes more difficult because primacy /supremacy are relative terms.

There are functional areas of non-negotiable supremacy of one over the other and are never interchangeable. The more rational argument would be that- power or primacy can't be confined to economic power only. Both men and women have naturally assigned roles to play for discipline and for upholding the order of the society they are in and when eroded often leads to depravity and conflict. It is here the feminists jump into action to pump in fresh blood and cry foul. In a male-dominated society, a woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a caring mother, and an admirable home-maker, and a cultural torch-bearer of idealism and self-sacrifice, to protect the interest of the entire family with all the holistic display of-service, tolerance, and being meek as her necessary features. A relentless pursuit of adjustment which she makes in her life with loyalty and obedience are the prescript qualities, she has to abide by. As soon as a Girl achieves maturity, she is inspired by the elements of pride, intolerance, and self-abnegation, and is trained and fine-tuned to accept a lower status in comparison to a man.

For successive centuries, the Hindu woman put on the anvil of mythic models from the ancient epics i.e. the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Purans*, and other epics. They are asked to get encouraged to adopt the prototype women characters like *Sita*, *Kunti*, *Gandhari*, *Panchaali*, etc... At every phase of their life, one is put to remain dependent upon a man i.e. her father, her husband, or her son, for the status and identity.

*Though Women had a place of pride in the Vedic time, the motivating features of modern India*

*came to the limelight with the ingenious release of the feminine sensibility. In the expansion of the Indo-Anglian novel, the feminine responsiveness achieved creative independence which merits acknowledgement in the ill-feeling of its relatively later expression. [ukessays 2018]*

Feminist writers emphasize the production of literature and literary representation within the stipulated framework that includes all social and cultural formations pertaining to the role of women in society, its historicity, and present practices. In this context, the aim is to address the above questions as well as to find its relevance of patriarchy in some of the select texts of ace feminist Novelist of Indian origin, Anita Desai. As a writer, Desai is unique in exploring the innermost psychic world of her characters. As R.S. Pathak comments:

*Anita Desai is one of the few Indian novelists in English who have tried to understand intimately the predicament of their female characters. She represents the welcome "creative release of feminine sensibility" [89]*

In her Novel 'Where Shall We Go This Summer' Desai adheres to a radical approach towards the conservatives. Though the heroines of Anita Desai often act violently, symbolizing the accumulated angst and suffocation, in this novel, we find a positive change. Sita reconciles herself to her fate. She could manage to strike a perfect balance between her inner self and the outer world. Her anguish is not like Maya and is not temperamental, rather depicts the realistic picture of an Indian woman who rebels against the convention and age-old model of life in her quest for freedom. Desai employs visual details and an impressionistic style in her attempt to convey a sense of the underlying meaning of everyday affairs, manner, and treatment. In B. Ramachandra Rao's view, the problem with them is not poverty, hunger, or starvation; they suffer from psychologically complicated situations, "they passionately discuss issues like conformity and rebellion, attachment and detachment" (33).

Similarly, the story of Maya in '*cry the peacock*' appears to be the combination of three-fold patterns of suffering as deprivation, alienation, and elimination. Firstly, Maya was deprived of parental care as well as a brotherly affection. Secondly, she fails to find the natural conjugal connection with her father figure husband, and at last, the elimination from life and her own self from familial responsibility and duty. Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* portrays the skivvy life of her female protagonist-Maya who seems to suffer since her marriage to the male, who fails to recognize her fractured identities. Regarding the psychological agonies of Maya in every turn of her life,

she had limited choices to decide her fate or the course of the journey, except the consequence in the end. This may either be attributed to the social structure of the prevalent society or the pattern of patriarchy which is best left for the readers to analyze. But, one thing becomes clear, that even today, despite the possibilities around, women are deprived of their due, and the scope of feminist theories often get validated in their argument.

It makes sense to mention here that- most of Desai's characters come from the oofy setups of Indian society. Yet! Are often found to be running away from their homes to some hill station in a quest for peace, from village to city to find a breathing space or vice versa. This marks the state of their suffocation in the social stereotypes or to fanning out their inner ennui as a result of utter negligence and dominance against which they find it difficult to revolt, because of the social stigmas and sickles of a discipline attached to it. Besides a couple of novels like *Voices in the City*, *In Custody*, *Baumgartner's Bombay* and to a certain extent *Bye Bye Blackbird*, Anita Desai's female characters are the protagonists in most of the novels, but the presence of men remain very much in the minds and lives of their women relations.

In that sense, it's the absence of these male characters, i.e. father of Maya and Sita, as well as husbands of Sarah and Nanda Kaul can be seen as quite conspicuous in nature. Sarah was never able to shed the thought of Adit from her mind and Raka can hardly forget her father's attitude to her mother. The leading female characters in *Cry the Peacock* and *Voices in the city*, Maya and Monisha rebel against their insensitive and uncaring husbands who never bothered to understand the feelings of their wives. Maya's rebellious attitude is the outcome of untamed frustration caused by the non-fulfillment of aspirations as a wife. Her desperate longing to satisfy her physical and emotional needs, which she needed most, were not duly reciprocated by her husband. As a modern educated woman, Maya finds it extremely difficult to tolerate Gautama's indifference towards her. As an outcome of frustration at its climax, she kills him and herself in a fit of extreme rage and anger.

To conclude, we may say that the theme of disharmony and discord justifies the patriarchal structure and at times to the maladjusted or ill-adjusted self. Besides Alienation, the unrequited love, drives Maya to the jaws of death and violence, while, Sita suffers from the obvious "*Oedipus complex*" Many critics and Scholars are of opinion that both Maya and Sita are representatives of Post-modern Indian Feminism, as evident in '*Cry the Peacock*' and '*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*', both represent the typical Indian personality structure, which is complex and

often multilayered. A fair psychoanalytical study may find Maya and Sita, as the representatives of oppressed female fraternity. Maya's inability to deal with neurosis goes for violence, while Sita's compromising and adaptive attitude reconciles her to home peacefully.

### CONCLUSION

The feminist standpoint is quietly palpable in these novels of Anita Desai, even though the revolting women are not so bold. The female protagonists are apparently unwilling to accept male dominance and the female subjugating tendency of Indian society. They rise in revolt against the traditional concept of submissiveness, like: *Sati-Savitri* who silently accepts the fate as it is, and this is in direct contrast to the philosophy of Sigmund Freud who says: "*anatomy is destiny*" [1924] because the traditionalist view accepted patriarchy as a biologically inflicted difference, therefore, the social roles assigned to women were also based on their physical capacity.

Since, the task assigned to men and women varies heavily- it is women's biology that primarily determines their psychology, their abilities, and roles. Society allowed men to be at the centre stage, while women were put amidst the crowd, and were nothing more than silent spectators. There could be some physical constraints or limitations in women's world or maybe those are little different from men, but the mental and emotional strength possessed by the women can never be equated by anything. Women are strong beings and have the power to create and destroy, but the differences between men and women are all man-made, which grew stronger with time. Hence, they remain at loggerheads for ages and shall remain so to secure their respective space for primacy, attention, and identity.

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