

## PORTRAYAL OF SOCIALLY SUBJUGATED INDIAN WOMEN IN DESAI'S "THE DOMESTIC MAID"

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**ABSTRACT:** *The specifics of this research include women's relegated portrayal in Indian society. Showalter's model of cultural feminism has been used to expose the subjugated Indian females. This perspective is taken as the foundation for the study which investigates that how the society in which female authors work and function shapes women's goals, responses and point of view. This study means to investigate the role and contribution of patriarchy and patriarchal values towards the misery, suffering, loneliness and unhappiness of women. Further it emphasizes other psychological, social and economic problems experienced by them. In pursuance of the methodological design outlined above, the story has been scrutinized on feminine notion. This research refers to social and cultural milieu of Indian women and founds the bleak outlook of Indian women's life.*

**KEYWORDS:** Feminism, Cultural model, Showalter, Feminine, Patriarchal.

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### INTRODUCTION

Desai is a modern English writer in India. Her novels and short stories won acclaim world widely. Most of her works encompass psychological issues concerned with female characters in Indian society. She delineates her female characters in adverse predicaments. Desai's female characters generally belong to a middle class, living in a threatening society. In *The Domestic Maid* (2014), her protagonist is a house maid who is at the mercy of society, where she is identified not as a human being but rather she is expected to play the stereotypical role of a caregiver. She lives under gender demarcation. In this story she focuses not only on the female living under patriarchal setup but also brings to consideration the misrepresentation of women by society. She asserts that social status does not make any difference. In either ways women have to suffer. The main themes which make appearance in the story are identity, gender discrimination, seclusion and subordination. The widespread apathy among the maids and the myriad problems of modern life are also crucial to this study.

Desai's *The Domestic Maid* (2014) is undoubtedly a feminist chunk built upon the theme of Hindu womanhood's self-sacrifice. This story bases on a feminist theorist, Showalter's cultural view which deals with how the society shapes a woman's understanding of herself, her society and her world. Showalter (1986) in this model observes the social, cultural, and financial status of women. In this masculine world, she declares that it is man who defines what it means to be human, not woman. Desai asserts the view that Indian women are living under male oppression and she also presents their disillusioned lives with feminine values. The society is not supportive or friendly rather it is inimical and indifferent to women. In this story Desai brings those elements to observation which are being suppressed. In *The Domestic Maid* (2014), Desai exposes that how the Indian society affirms sexual inequality. Women are exhibited as domestic maids. Their qualities like sacrifice are ignored, they are considered just as caregivers. They are socially portrayed as frail, weaker sex, nurses or maids. Gendered traditions have been given paramount consideration in the story. Cultural identity, community and gender are the leading issues in the story. The problem presented in this study is the social portrayal of Indian women in Desai's short story *The Domestic Maid*.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Desai is an Indian feminist writer. Several critics have remarked on her works from diverse points. Jussawalla in her book "*Interview with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*" (1992) put that Desai's works encompass the traumas of stereotypical vulnerable and desperate women who do not fight back in defiance against social setup.

The female characters delineated by Desai in her works appear completely helpless, dependent and dejected. Khan in her book "*Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel*" (1993) regards realism as the prominent feature of Anita's works. She brings to consideration the British's colonial past and India's postcolonial reality. She directs at the alienation, depression, agonies, and sufferings of Desai's female characters.

Critics praised the originality and eclecticism of her work. Krishnaswami in her book "*The Woman in Indian Fiction in English*" (2001) scrutinized Desai's novels from feminist perspective. She recounts the social traditions responsible for the hardships of women. Dharker in her book "*I Speak for the Devil*" (2002) believes that women do not fit into any nation except as subordinate creatures. Those who do not abide by national norms about appropriate behaviour are rejected within the nation in which they live.

Kumar in the book "*Critical Responses to Feminism*" (2006) expounded that Desai never attempts to justify the actions of her characters whether they are apt or not, which is the most significant technique of her works. Chakravarty in her book "*Feminism and Cotemporary Women Writers*" (2008) has presented a general critique on Desai's novels.

Jackson in her book "*Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing*" (2010) argues that Desai's characters mostly belong to middle class who are exposed to adversaries of life. And she brings to focus how they pass through thorny path of life. Some critics generally regard her

characters unheroic as they do not claim autonomy and are powerfully swayed by outside historical and social forces.

Desai portrays her characters with subjective reality where others determine their identity. Mukherjee in her book "*Feminism in Contemporary Indian Women Writers*" (2011) focuses on Desai's miserable and sad female characters in her works. She asserts that in a patriarchal society a woman is defined only by her differences from male values. But Mukharjee does not appear successful in defending women as she blames them and overlooks the actual issue.

Most of Desai's works occupy the problems of Indian culture from a feminine perspective and call attention on the Indian women's difficulties in maintaining their self-identity. Desai presents her female characters as weak, meek and submissive. Pandey in her article "History, Strife for Life: A Existential Crises in *Cry the Peacock* and *That Long Silence: A Postcolonial Study. Feminism in Contemporary Indian Women Writers*" (2011) pronounces women as fragile beings in Desai's *Cry the Peacock* (1991). She regards the world of Maya, the protagonist of the novel as improbable. She focuses on the existential crises. Madhurima in her article "The Self, the Family, and Society in Anita Desai's Novels. *Feminism in Contemporary Indian Women Writers*" (2011) criticizes Desai's novels and regards them as protagonist's own complexes. She flunks in pointing out the outer agency responsible for their suffering

Gopal in his book "*A Critical Study of the Novels of Anita Desai*" (2013) rightly added that Desai explores and portrays a common woman's psyche who is living under social oppression. But still she adjusts herself within the spheres of so called normal life.

## METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The feminine paradigm of thought, a key framework, has been used as the conceptual framework for the execution of this research. The research is qualitative and descriptive in nature. Desai's *The Domestic Maid* (2014) has been taken and analyzed critically under the lens of feminism. There are many versions of feminism. Showalter (1977) coined the term feminism with gyno-criticism which covers different facets of women's works like biological, psychoanalytical, linguistic and cultural.

For this study Showalter's cultural model of feminist analysis is followed. Showalter named it as female phase which looks particularly at female writing and female experience (as cited in Barry, 1995: p.123). It probes at how society shapes the images of female inferiority and oppression ingrained in our society. Showalter in her essay *Feminist Criticism in Wilderness* says that cultural model provides "a more complete and satisfying way to talk about the specificity and difference of women's writing than theories based in biology, linguistics or psychoanalysis..." (Showalter, 1981). It also attempts to analyze the relationship between gender and class and to show how the dominant power structures controlled by men influence all of society and oppress women. Showalter (1981) believes that women form a muted group within the dominant male culture, a group whose reality and culture overlaps with those of the dominant culture, but is not contained within it. The primary experiences of women encountered by themselves have been discussed in this model. The issues of social class, race, nationality and history have also been included in it.

## Analysis

Desai's *The Domestic Maid* (2014) presents a nebulous picture of the quality of life offered to Indian women. She presents a detailed account of the established norms of socialization and untoward experiences in the lives of common Indian women specifically those belonging to lower class, the domestic maids. They are playing their role to comfort their family or society. Desai gives the description of house maids in the story as: "The group is a mix of young, middle-aged and old women. The women are dressed in dull weary cotton *sarees*, the *pallav* draped around their bony shoulders, their slippers worn out with months of continuous drag". (Desai, 2014: p.1). Further she says, "The young ones of the lot dressed in hand-me-down *salwar kameez*, adjusting their *dupattas* every now and then. Each woman carrying either a small pouch which serves as a purse containing their bare essentials or a little cloth bag" (Desai, 2014: p.1).

Women's shattered condition has further been highlighted when she says, "their gaunt bony faces. Their cotton *sarees* damp and limp due to constant wiping. Their ill-fitting blouses hang on their emaciated bodies" (Desai, 2014: p.4).

This precise account of women's appearance makes their social plight clear. They are bearing lot of problem in one or the other way. Through chit-chat they are trying to forget about their predicament. Their delusive laughter makes others indifferent to them. There is no distinction of age or perhaps age does not matter. The married women prefer part-time jobs to balance work and their families, whereas the unmarried young girls prefer to work full-time as housekeepers. Women are playing the role of care taker either for their own family or for others. They are trying to hide their inner anxieties through false pretense of happiness and laughter. Their bony shoulders depict their poor health condition, hand-me-down dresses and pouch with bare essentials show their economic possessions. Constant banter gives nonchalant idea. No one gives them second glance or they do not even bother to give any importance to their presence or even do not want to notice it, intentionally ignore them. As Desai says: "Why would they; what's special about them? Nothing" (Desai, 2014: p.1).

The issue of identity appears as the maids bring cards bearing their social identity as maids which, "show their identity cards to the guards. A card that certifies their social status, an identity- that of a Domestic Maid" (Desai, 2014: p.1).

Desai's female protagonist Geeta, in this story is a poor maid. Geeta and all other maids are living life in abysmal. Geeta is living in an eerie world of poverty and miseries. She is quintessence of common Indian women, bearing all the hardships without any complain. She entered in a deluding world of city life in a desire to improve her standard of life.

Aforementioned social inequality and derogatory stereotypes of women is the economic backdrop which developed in the form of social and cultural arena. Another stark reality Desai presents in the story is the overt discriminating attitude of men towards women. Its instances are when guard's not replying to maid and secondly when Geeta tells her friend how her husband beats her for not lending some money for him.

Desai indirectly claims that in Indian patriarchal society, a servile obedience is demanded from women. Women are conditioned not to expect an elevated status like men. Desai points to

patriarchal autonomy impinge on the lives of women. Desai trenchantly presented the miserable plight of Indian women.

The title of the story also refers to marginalizing of women as *The Domestic Maid*. The social status does not make any difference, they have to suffer or play the role of a maid either for their own family or for others. The duties women are expected to do are cleaning; washing; cooking; baby-sitting etc. Desai writes, “A passing guard leers at them and makes a vulgar guttural sound. The girls glare at him, other than that they have no choice but to ignore him” (Desai, 2014: p.5). These lines give an account of omnipresence of male threat in society and oppression. Women in Indian society are facing outer and inner threats.

Asha snarls at her. She designate all maids for being ungrateful. Geeta is supposed to bear this insult daily during her work span. Asha’s expletives prompted a wave of rage inside her and she complains on the verge of tears: “These women do not understand the difficulties we go through. They have money and a comfortable life” (Desai, 2014: p.5).

Another female character Chaya appears in the story. She is also a domestic maid, friend of Geeta. Chaya succinctly tries to pacify her friend. She counsels Geeta to understand the position of Asha: “See, they are also women and have to live under their husband, in-laws. If they are working then there is the frustration at office as well. Because they cannot take out this anger and frustration on anyone else, they take it out on us. That’s all” (Desai, 2014: p.5). She further adds: “The only difference between their lives and ours is that their husbands don’t beat them black and blue; for us that is the eternal truth, day in and day out” (Desai, 2014: p.5). Chaya’s pithy conversation shows that women are also aware of their plight. Women are bound, battered, tortured, humiliated and abused in India.

The second female character Asha is representative of sulky madams. She questions the veracity of Geeta’s miserable story. Asha’s point blank refusal to listen to her (Geeta) directs at how women are not considered even by other women. Society rejects their affection as namby-pamby nonsense. Asha stands for supercilious ladies who are also facing frustration in their life.

An abyss of despair and loneliness shadows throughout the story. Representing different female characters is such a pathetic condition Desai in fact sketches degenerated social dynamics of Indian culture towards women.

## CONCLUSION

Desai’s *The Domestic Maid* is a polemic against cultural and social values set for women.

She lambastes upon Indian society for their biased behavior towards women. She speaks of degradation, subordination and dishonoring of humanity especially of females in this story. The notion of objectification is central to the story. Women are not more than mere objects. They lack in agency, autonomy and self-determination. Their feelings and experiences are not taken into account.

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