

Women in Different Dimensions in Margaret Atwood and Anita Desai

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Abstract

In Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* and Anita Desai's novels *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* attempts have been made by some women characters to 'liberate' themselves from and to find alternatives to the institution of marriage. A study of the careers of these women characters enables one to arrive at the attitudes of these two women novelists towards the institution of marriage and the women's liberation movement.

Keywords: Liberation, Womanhood, Biological theory, Marriage institution,

In Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* it is Ainsley who chooses to seek an alternative to the institution of marriage when she resolves to become a mother without encumbering herself with a husband and rejects the way of the women who choose to marry. When she asserts that "[Women do not] give more thought to the characteristics they pass to their children [as, if they did,] they wouldn't rush blindly into things (43)." She has in her mind a woman's role as a mother rather than the one as a wife. She adds, "We know the human race is degenerating and it's all because people pass on their weak genes without thinking about it, and medical science means they aren't naturally selected out the way they used to be." (P. 43)

This observation of hers makes it evident that she recognizes the man's role in the reproductive activity no doubt, but she regards him as a passive agent and assigns the role of the active agent to the woman, as that must be the reason why she is holding women responsible for the degeneration of human race. Her opinion seems to have its roots in the Darwinian principle of Natural Selection and also in the biological theory of genes.

Her conditioning by her study of science has been such that ethical considerations do not figure in her thoughts at all and she does not find anything wrong in becoming a mother without getting married. She does not feel any pricks of conscience, when in a mood of defiance she tells her landlady; ". . . I'd like you to know that I'm going to have a child too. . ." (224). In a society where one is permitted to have children only within conjugal bounds she has the boldness not only to; say this but also to do this. All this signifies that she considers a husband

a superfluity-and has resolved to bring up her child entirely in accordance with her wishes and proposes to be its guardian. This is also evidenced by the fact that she says:

No, I'm not going to get married. That's what's wrong with most children, they have too many parents. You can't say the sort of household Clara and Joe are running is an ideal situation for a child. Think of how confused their mother-image and their father-image will be, they're riddled with complexes already. And it's mostly because of the father. (39-40))

This is her opinion about Joe who is a husband of a very cooperative nature and with whom Clara is very happy.

Ainsley also employs her flirtation with child psychology to justify her stand as she asserts that a child should have before it only the mother-image and not a father-image as according to her the father image causes a damage to the mother-image (40). The mistake that she commits is that she takes an opinion to be a gospel truth and does not tell herself that psychologists have been expressing opinions about human behaviour on the basis of a limited knowledge of facts with the result that many of such opinions are neglected by the psychologists of the next generation. For instance, there was a time when Freud's theory of sex was accepted almost universally, but when Adler and Jung came out with their findings, Freud's assertions were challenged.

But soon there comes a stage when Ainsley tries to persuade Leonard, whose child she is carrying in her womb, to marry her for the proper upbringing of the child and tells him: "...the point is of course I'm going to have a baby, but it should have the best circumstances, and it's your responsibility to provide it with a father. A father- image" (213) and she seeks the help of even Marian to persuade Leonard to agree to marry her when she says to her, "You've got to make him listen to reason" (213).

How keen she becomes to get a husband becomes clear when we come to the scene in which Leonard is trying to run away from her, even physically, and Ainsley is "pulling at his sleeve" (214) in an attempt to persuade him to marry her. This keenness of hers is indicated further by the fact that when she is jilted by Leonard she attempts to get somebody else and at last succeeds in making Fischer Smythe to marry her. If she had been true to her earlier conviction she should not have done this. But since she is as keen to have a husband now as she was adamant on not having one formerly, it is evident that now her views on marriage have changed and this change must have been brought about by some addition to her knowledge of child psychology. Margaret Atwood's proper upbringing signifies her suggesting that there is no alternative to the institution of marriage so far as the family's function of proper upbringing of children is concerned.

Margaret Atwood's approach is different from that of Tennyson. In Tennyson's poem "The Princess" the institution of marriage is vindicated on the ground that when the emotion of love is aroused in a girl's heart, she cannot escape surrendering herself to the man with whom she falls in love; but Margaret Atwood vindicates the institution of marriage on utilitarian grounds in her novel. As has been pointed out Ainsley chooses to marry because she considers

it essential for a child to have the father-image before it for its proper upbringing. In other words Margaret Atwood Justifies the institution of marriage on a rational ground, rather than on an emotional one.

Moreover, Margaret Atwood considers the reasons why women tend to regard the institution of marriage to be inconvenient. She does it through Joe when he says, "...I think it's harder for any woman who's been to university. She gets the idea she has a mind, her professors pay attention to what she has to say, they treat her like a thinking human being, when she gets married, her core gets invaded" (235).

What he says here is tantamount to saying that the views of a woman are not paid adequate heed to by her husband with the result that a woman who has developed the capacity to think feels that her individuality is being suppressed on account of her having become a wife. In Anita Desai's novels we meet women protagonists who are not happy with their husbands and in them one can study the ways in which a married woman can try to 'liberate' herself. Some of the choices before a woman leading an unhappy married life are: she may kill the husband; she may kill herself, and she may part company with him. Three women protagonists of Anita Desai chose these three ways in her novels, namely *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

The protagonist of *Cry the Peacock* has heaps of complaints against her husband, the two of which are that he has very little time to spare for her and her emotional needs and that he fails to appreciate her feelings. Her killing him by pushing him down the roof signifies her making an attempt, to move out of the conjugal bounds. The narrator's report towards the end of the novel that this girl is insane signifies that the novelist regards her approach as anything but sane. In other words, the novelist seems to suggest that the approach that makes a woman 'liberate' herself from the bonds of marriage by killing her husband is not sane.

The protagonist of the novel *Voices in the City* finds the behaviour of her mother-in-law and of other members of her family disgusting as she has not yet become a mother and the members of the family talk of getting her operated upon in order to detect and remove defects in her ovary. The girl's committing suicide in disgust signifies that she regards the institution of marriage as unbearable and that she resolves to move out of it. But since in order to move out of marriage she has to commit suicide, it is quite obvious that her quest for an alternative to marriage has failed. In other words, here too we have the suggestion that a quest for the alternative to the institution of marriage is fruitless.

So far as Sita, the protagonist of Anita Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is concerned, she takes steps much less drastic than those taken by the protagonists of *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*. She walks out on the marriage for a brief period and this restores her to normalcy. There are three distinct periods in her married life: during the first period she begins to harbour a dislike for the restraints of marriage and resolves to move away from her husband; during the second period she stays on in the island and regains peace of mind, and during the third period she is back home to lead a normal life with her husband. Her

going to the island symbolizes her making a quest for an alternative to the marriage and her resolving to go back to live with her husband symbolizes her admitting that she has failed to find any alternative. In other words here too Anita Desai seems to be suggesting that there is no alternative to marriage.

Thus, both these women novelists have arrived at the same conclusion viz there is no alternative to the institution of marriage. However, there are differences between their treatment Margaret Atwood presents the views of a girl who moves from an anti-marriage stance to a pro-marriage one, but Anita Desai studies the problems married women and finds how their quests for alternatives to marriage prove futile.

However, in the novels of both these novelists some women characters are unhappy with the conjugal restraints. In Margaret Atwood's novel *Ainsley* remains anti-marriage for some time, and in the novels of Anita Desai they try to move out of the conjugal bonds. Obviously both the novelists are of the view that there is something wrong somewhere inside the conjugal ties and only the female partner knows where the shoe pinches.

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