
From Silent Suffering to Strong Self Identity: A Study of Anees Jung's *Breaking the Silence*

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Abstract

Anees Jung is one of the widely read post-independence Indian English women writers who write consciously of the issues that concern the educated middle-class women in Indian society. She attempts to closely analyze man-woman relationship within the family and the contemporary social set-up. She focuses on the captivating problems and the suffocating environs of her female characters who struggle hard in this malicious and male-dominated world to discover their true self identity. Jung does not advocate separation from the partner but a diplomatic assertion of one's identity from silent suffering.

Keywords: Post Independence, Indian English Writers, Middle class, Man-Woman relationship, Problems, Male-dominated, Silent suffering, Self-identity.

Introduction

The one-time idealized and idolized images of women have undergone some unprecedented metamorphosis all the world over especially in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. According to Indian tradition, a woman must submit to her husband in every possible respect. She must make the marital home pleasant for him. She must cook the meals, wash the dishes, and take care of the children. She must never enquire about money and she must acquiesce to her husband's every demand. But what happens when the old customs lose their power and the woman no longer believes her life should be determined in this restricted sense? There is a shift in values and women have started acknowledging themselves the co-equals of man. Dipak Giri has rightly expressed in his book, "Indian English novel which was male-oriented now has become open, free from male-female division and has won for in Indian women novelists many prestigious awards in the last few decades" (Indian Women Novelists in English, 119).

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Women writers in many countries speak the language of silence such as Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai and Anees Jung have tried with sincerity and honesty to deal with the physical, psychological and emotional stress syndrome of women in their fiction and Anees Jung's novel titled *Breaking the Silence* is a feminist novel in the true sense of the term. It is a sincere attempt to portray the sufferings of subjugated Indian women who are the victims of male chauvinism thrust by patriarchal social set up.

Anees Jung is one of the widely read post-independence Indian English writers who write consciously of the issues that concern the educated middle-class women in Indian society. She attempts to closely analyze man-woman relationship within the family and the contemporary social set-up. She primarily focuses on the captivating problems and the suffocating environs of her female characters, who struggle hard in this malicious and male-dominated world to discover their true self identity. In quest for wholeness of identity, Jung does not advocate separation from the partner but a diplomatic assertion of one's identity within marriage.

Gender discrimination has remained the most important and most debatable issue of Indian society where women have always been treated as inferiors to men. Man is elevated to the status of a god who controls and directs the life of women. The gender stereotypes restrict the economic, political, and social freedom of women and force them to be docile objects in the hands of men. Consequently, women live without identity or with a mutilated identity designed for them by men- their masters. To quote the words of Beauvoir, "She is the prey of the species that will impose its mysterious laws on her, and generally, this alienation frightens her" (*The Second Sex*, 554).

Breaking the Silence

The title of the novel *Breaking the Silence* shows similarities with the titles of novels written by other Indian male and female writers. For instance the play *Silence! the Court is in Session* by Vijay Tendulkar a Marathi writer, *That Long Silence* by Sashi Deshpande, a staunch feminist, both handle subjects of women sufferings and Jung's novel *Breaking the Silence* is an example of how women are treated as inferiors by men. Thus, the novel *Breaking the Silence* too is an example of how women are treated as inferiors by men. The novel is piece

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of realism as it gives the firsthand information of the sufferings of women hailing from lower middle class and rural communities across India.

The title *Breaking the Silence* is amply justified and expressive of self-identity of women. Through the various stories narrated by women to Jung, Jung projects how women are breaking the silence by voicing out their opinions. Women are revolting in all aspects of economic, social, political, religious and educational barriers created to them by the male society. The title is significant and brings home the truth that from India to Australia and from Europe to America, women are gaining a voice. They are speaking out against the age-old traditions that have kept them silent for so long and in so doing are gaining strength.

The book begins with a dead sister speaking from the grave. The peasant women of Vietnam work in their fields as hard as their Indian sisters, taking equal pride in their labor. Divided among themselves by caste and class, they lived lives of austerity and fragility while their men boasted of a false power over them and over each other. Eventually things have changed in Vietnam in the paddy fields where women work as their economic problem is solved with the help of money accessible to them through women's credit scheme. So the government schemes provided to women has given dignity to each of her children and it means a new sense of confidence, a rise in status in the community, greater respect from the husband, less tension in the house and less poverty but a greater sense of well-being.

Male monopoly of knowledge and power is one way to exercise supremacy over women. The progress in science and technology have left women still in the dark and deprived of education so that men can sustain their subordination. This is well exemplified in the book where women were not allowed to enter schools and colleges. Girls like Beena are learning to paint on paper sell at prices that bring them money and recognition. Beena says, "I am no longer 'abla' (helpless) but 'sabla', strong within myself. I can paint, I can read and write. And I can teach other girls what I am learning. I can share my feelings; tell my story" (BS 29).

Anees Jung differs from other feminist writers in this angle. She does not write as a feminist but a woman's perception in her works. She deals with the genuine problems of contemporary Indian woman. With her works she could convey the depths of female psyche. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women, crushed under the weight of a male

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dominated and tradition bound society. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations makes her novels 'feminist texts'.

By describing women characters with a feminist awareness, Jung reveals her own attitude to the concept of liberation. Her writings therefore lend themselves to a feminist interpretation, which is not necessarily based on Western type of feminism. Her female protagonists re-define the Sati-Savitri image. She tries to re-evaluate the present Indian value system and recommends the importance of equality in man-woman relationship.

Jung generally has the heroine as her narrators. Her women have a peculiar authenticity, as they seem to be direct offshoots of their peculiar backgrounds. It may be mentioned at the outset that while dealing with her female character, especially their relations with men, their drives and responses and their sexual repressions, Jung has made significant efforts to step out of the main current of narrative devices and linguistic techniques as developed by the masculine approach. She has tried to look at things essentially from the women's point of view. Although writing for her is not an act of deliberation, reason and choice and is primarily a matter of instinct, Jung is fully aware of the possibilities of her medium and seems to be making at times strenuous efforts to explore its possibilities. This is well exemplified in the story of Gayatri Mishra who found her liberation when she left the prison of a mansion to go and live in an asram for abandoned women. She says, trembling with the recognition "How much 'Shakti' I have wasted for forty years!' 'Once a woman finds her own strength she can't be looted as an old woman now, I have come to realize that I was not born to sit in a corner of a mansion which isolated me from living itself". (BS 159)

The affirmative words of Gayatri prove the fact that the silence for women is no longer deceptive, but a platform to break the cocoon of suffering and insult, a journey from innocence to experience and knowledge.

Social conformity has always been obligatory for a woman than for a man. Generally, a woman's identity tends to be defined by others. In the novel under study, Jung presents the meanings of silence. Jung's idea of marriage is projected through Merlinda Bobis, a Philippine poet and teacher, whom Jung met in Sydney at Wollogang University. Both of them became friends within no time that they began sharing each other's secret's and woes. Melinda Bobis told Jung that she was married to a man whom she loves but can no longer live with him because "For he does not want my child" (BS 40).

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But Bobis being a feminist wanted to be a mother and growing up in a rigid catholic society did not stop her from speaking her mind. When she was thirty and still not married, Bobis' aunts would push her to get married but her grandmother who was a natural feminist would advise her to remain deaf to her aunt's suggestions in the following manner: "Don't listen to them. Do what you are doing. Marriage is not everything" (BS 41).

So it is obvious from the words of Melinda's grandmother that she has learnt so much when she was in the West and this new thought made her empowered and saved her from the enslavement of being confined to the four walls of the house and the kitchen specifically. So, the story of Melinda's grandmother is an inspiration to women who are deprived of their privileges and rights and helps them to attain their self-identity by breaking the silence that is by breaking the bond of the institution of marriage.

Silence between the husband and the wife becomes a major issue in the families. It creates a gap between them but a communication gap. In order to have a well-balanced sexual life, it is important that husband and wife be at same wavelength. They should supplement and not supplant each other. Further, they should know each other well physically as well as emotionally. It is this harsh reality that Deshpande tries to project through the female protagonist who, at the end, chooses to break her long silence of the past.

The title of the novel, *That Long Silence*, suggests the failure to communicate and assert one's own self. The central character of the novel Jaya contemplates her domestic life and eventually becomes a rebel after seventeen years of her married life. During her solitude, Jaya undertakes a introspection of her own self. The title of the novel *That Long Silence* is derived from a speech made by Elizabeth Robins to the WWSL in 1907. Inspired by the speech, Deshpande used a few lines as the epigraph of the novel. It says, "If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy –the weight of that long silence of one half of the world" (1).

So the phrase "that long silence" in the third line becomes the base of the novel. It refers to the silence of the main character, Jaya Kulkarni who maintained silence throughout her life.

Similarly *Breaking the Silence* by Jung also shows how women have broken all barriers of silence in their lives to affirm their identity. Hence silence turns out to be a channel for the women of the house to break and express her feelings and air out her

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opinions. Thus, in the novel, Jung has presented women who revolt openly by breaking the silence.

Jung's novels contain the seed of definite quest for a true and authentic self. By making her heroines undergo stages of self-introspection and self-reflection, Jung makes them evolve themselves into more liberated individuals that what their gender of culture have sanctioned. This is well projected in the story of Taslima Nasrin, the controversial writer from Bangladesh who questioned the very premise of motherhood. All religions declare that motherhood is what makes a woman's existence meaningful. Jung had an occasion to meet Nasrin in Dhaka when she was still a free woman and living with an adoring mother. She recapitulates with tenderness the mother's endurance and supreme sacrifice is ideally cherished one way or the other by women all over Asia. Nasrin says, "Paradise lies under the feet of a mother in India, while in Srilanka a mother's position is equated with that of buddha in a home. Similar reverence is given to mother's by Buddhists I found in Thailand and Laos" (BS 61).

The Tale of Juana Inez de la Cruz, a spirited woman and nun from Mexico is an instance of the concepts of the new woman. Jung narrates the self-identity of Cruz through her story. She says Cruz fled the shelter of a home to find freedom in a cloistered convent where she felt she could gaze at the sky, study the stars, seek answers to a million questions and write poetry. So, the portrait of the nun celebrates the fierce spirit of a woman born free.

Another interesting woman's story in the book whom Jung is excited about because she is an example of attaining self-identity, is Maria, a young woman of twenty. She is an embodiment of the old and the new woman from Australia. She sees herself as a product of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. Maria was married to a Vietnamese. Soon she became pregnant but had to undergo a miscarriage to please the man whom she intended to marry. Being a Vietnamese, he was very particular about his culture, so he did not want her pregnant before marriage. Despite all restrictions from her parents, Maria went beyond by getting married to a Vietnamese against the wishes of her parents. So, Maria projects a degree of competence, self-esteem and self-identity that is unusual in women of her age.

According to Jung, the story of Maria brings home the truth that lack of education is no barrier for women because she was more re-assured, active and initiative. Maria did not see herself as victim of male chauvinism but took pride in mapping out the course of her life.

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The freedom that she earned remains a dream for many women of her age who are still remaining in the dark bound by age old traditions.

Catherine Lambert is another female character in the novel whose story is worth reading. Lambert hails from Australia and Jung describes her physical appearance in such a straightforward manner that the very appearance is a symbol of self-identity that Lambert has achieved by being modern in her outlook and dressing. Dressed daringly, Lambert's sleek black blouse reveals an ample bosom.

Her face is heavily painted; her lips are almost as red as her hair, which seems to fly, like her voice, in the autumn wind. Strong and clear, it soars out of another reality that she generously shares with those who have come to eat and drink in the Universal Wine Bar (BS 143).

Thus, Catherine Lambert's story is symbolic of an empowered woman who has accomplished self-identity. She describes herself as a fiercely independent woman singing her way through life to support both herself and her daughter and bring up in the dignity that Catherine has never known herself.

Anees Jung then continues to tell the story of Alanais, twenty-four-year young girl who was studying at Concordia University in Montreal. She has stayed single preferring to adopt and bring up a young girl. Alanais was invited by the National Film Board of Canada to turn her stories into short films to enable them to reach more schools and more children. Alanais believed that self-identity for woman comes from within. She says, "It is important for a woman to know where the power comes from. I never accepted that I was less than anything else, never allowed any outside power to rule me. The real power lies within..." (BS 149).

Through the story of Alanais, Jung drives home the point that self-identity for a woman is possible through discovering the power within.

The movement of self- renewal has transformed women of all ages. These movements are trying to bridge the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. They are trying to make women aware of their strength and instill self-esteem in them. Thanks to Pandurang Shastri Athalve for conducting a traditional school to create consciousness of self-identity in women an bringing out thousands of women out of their homes. "Traditionally tied to the 'rasoda',

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the kitchen, the way cows are tied to a tree, women are beginning to gain a sense of who they are, by recognizing that in each of them rest the divine” (BS 151).

The novel concludes that the message of Mahatma Gandhi who, during the struggle for India’s independence appealed to the women of the country, both literate and illiterate, belonging to all castes and creeds to come out of their homes and take part in agitations-picket against the sale of liquor and foreign cloth, which were then considered dangerous activities. Jung was inspired by his message which was trumpet call to all women to rebel and shield themselves from all forms of violence and injustice done to them by men. Gandhiji’s message is ‘if non-violence is the law of our being, then the future is with women’. His words spread like fire and thousands of women came out of their homes, courted arrest, and went to jail disregarding the danger. Thus, the freedom proclaimed by Gandhi’s call gave women the liberation and independence from centuries of bondage and fear. In fact this freedom became an inspiring factor and paved the way for a woman like Smt. Indira Gandhi to become the country’s first lady prime minister. For Anees Jung, the life of Smt. Indira Gandhi is an embodiment of an empowered and independent woman who has attained self-identity.

Conclusion

Jung expresses her own views in the *Afterword* that writing this book created self-identity for her. As a writer and journalist, Jung realized that she was writing like a man and becoming a writer which helped her to lose her age and gender. She says “I am beginning to admit that it was writer’s latent curiosity that has helped push me out of a cloistered home to seek and discover a world and, in the process, myself” (BS 180).

So along with other women in the book, Anees Jung too has accomplished self-identity. From a city of veiled women, she has changed herself into a fully empowered woman with a veil no longer on her face as it blew away in strong wind. She is happy that woman like her have begun to walk on their own shores and are being reborn. The women have stepped out of the Caucasian circle, crossed the mythical Lakshman Rekha by breaking the silence of injustice, and won a hazardous journey from silent suffering to strong self identity.

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