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## **QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN HOME AND BEYOND—ASIAN WOMEN IN LITERATURE**

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### **Abstract**

Through history and cultures, thinking minds have always tried to answer the question ‘What is a woman?’ Feminist discourses addressing literary texts have put forward new queries on her representation which concerns the understanding of a woman’s socially constructed complex position. There is an attempt to make her conform to the patriarchal norms, lose her individuality and subordinate her directly or indirectly, constraining her in civil and domestic life. Feminists often emphasize the freedom and responsibility of a person to create oneself as a self-governing individual, whereas they argue that to a woman, this struggle for recognition, is tabooed. Her sense of identity is not fully formed since she is positioned as ‘other’ to man, in a male dominated society. This lack of female self is also present in literature where she appears as objects of men’s fantasies and fears – metaphorical angels and witches, but never as autonomous individuals. A woman is expected to limit herself to her domestic sphere and revolve in the nuances of relationships. Is she really the happy, satiated angel of the house or a fretting soul who wants to see beyond what she is allowed to see? Is she free to listen to her free will and decide her fate? In this article I shall explore the significance of ‘home’ in a woman’s life and the constraints and compassion associated with it, analyzing Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003) and Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* (1995).

**Key Words:** Identity, exile, liberation, Asian women.

### **Introduction : Home and Woman**

Feminism has come a long way from being a political movement that talks of liberation of women from gender based discrimination, promotion of opportunities and standing on equal level with men to questioning the sacrosanct and has redefined its frontiers. Feminist literary criticism is not to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to change the world (Fisher & Silber, 2003:39) According to Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, feminist studies specify the angle of inquiry rather than the sex of either its subject or its object ( Edwards, 2009:39). The intention is to change the way readers understand themselves and conceptualize their surroundings. It is a criticism with a cause, seeking to correct the devaluation of women and transform the institution of literature, criticism and education.

Centuries ago, since the beginning of the Aryan civilization, as it is said in the *Dharma Shastras*, the ancient Indian social law code, there were rules decreed for a woman which asserted that a woman should not do anything independently even in her house and should be under the control of the male members in the family (Wendy, 1965:115-116). She will serve like a maid, nourish like a mother, give good advice like a minister and in private she shall be enticing like a beloved. De Beauvoir’s crucial distinction between ‘being woman’ and society’s construction of a person ‘as a woman’ challenged the essential imbalance that goes back to the period as early as the Old Testament. In the biblical era when it has been more or less the way Jehovah assigned for a woman named Eve in the holy Bible;

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"I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."  
(Genesis, 3: 16)

In this statement, two things are clearly indicated, rather prescribed for a woman – that she will be serving men and be subordinated to men. That a woman is always associated with passivity incapable of being independent and her womb as a handicap to her self-establishment is the idea that became central to feminist literary criticism. Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex* (1949) thus rendered marriage as an oppressive and exploitive socio-economic means that function as fetters binding a woman to domesticity and sexual inequality. Judith Butler, rightly said that as De Beauvoir suggested gender is an aspect of identity which is gradually acquired (Butler,1986: .35-49). The belief system that operates in a male-oriented society concludes that a woman is 'happy' if her needs are provided and she is protected. Her liberty, the freeness to know more, do more and have more is not considered as fulfilment of her human potential in face of the limited happiness that is given to her by her male partner. De Beauvoir felt this kind of life offer no liberty at all because that disregards female emancipation and tie a woman to her home where she performs household works that might not involve any kind of rationalism and does not strengthen her thinking potential (De Beauvoir, 1973:301). Even her act of giving birth is a purely animal way and it does not lend her the status of a creator as her influence on the child is short-lived. No sooner the child starts adapting the phallogocentric worldview, the mother is relegated to the background. What remains behind is a sense of self-annihilation and a silent submission to her androcentric cosmology. In such a male dominated social plight, where women in their struggle to survive with their individual identity are facing the storms and thunderbolts, feminist criticism try to highlight the inherent problems of being a woman through the critical analysis of literary texts.

In this paper, my aim is to explore the relation between a 'woman' and her 'home' in literary texts and focus on the aspect of a woman's identification and honour, the right to lead life as an individual, capable of taking decisions on her own. Through the analysis of fictional beings, I wish to put forward the view that women should not seem merely as projections of someone else's negative or positive characteristics but as entities unto themselves – as living, evolving, creative beings whose options and destinies are theirs. A woman should have the capacity to think and decide for herself and develop her own potential. My study is on the delineation of Asian women characters in postmodern novels. For this purpose, I have chosen Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) and Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (1995).

### **The Rite of Self-exile**

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* has an ascetic like Nanda Kaul, who retires to Kasauli Hills and leads a life of seclusion and seeks absolute privacy. As a prototypical Indian woman, she is a wife and also a mother. She has been a consistent housewife, looking after everyone in the household, attending guests, and on her toe always to be there as soon as someone needs her. Though it appeared that she was provided with everything a woman needs for her existence, Nanda's life was void and incomplete. She kept to the status of her husband's stature, diligently performing her strenuous duty as she was expected to do, being the quintessential 'good Indian wife'. Her days were busy, hardly did she find time for herself. She moved from one room to another in her big house, but there was no solace in any one of them. She felt her own identity had been dissolved in her supposedly pious duty of being a 'home-maker', though she never quite managed to make the house she lived with her husband and her children her 'home'. Being marginalized and excluded from the right to lead her life according to her wishes and to think independently as a conscious person, she became a victim of the social control that grants the arbitrary dismissal of her entity as the 'other' (Arrighi, 2001:5). In spite of having children with her husband, her sexuality has remained untouched, infertile and cold. She never attached with her husband on a mental sphere. Perhaps her mental orientation as a human being never came in the domain of consideration and was completely ignored by the male-oriented social structure she was a part of. social prejudice and discrimination can lead to delegitimation of a woman, who becomes a part of the target group in a patriarchal structure (Bar-Tal, 1988) determining that it does not deserve fair treatment according to a code of norms calling for decent and proper behaviour. Desai explores

the tremendous psychological crises and struggles in the life of Nanda Kaul, with an aim of exposing the submerged truth through stirring her sensibility and psyche (Bhatnagar & Rajeshwar, 2000:88).

What I feel exceptional about Nanda Kaul is her boldness rather her stamina to enter into a self-quest at the ripe season of her life. Normally, women despite suffering continuously in their families from extreme low self confidence and mental detachment, fail to lead a voluntary exile away from everybody in a desolate place (of course the material resource also should be available, as hardly women can afford that being always economically controlled by their male associates). Her decision of a self-willed exile was her escape from panoptical masculine stare. Her choice was the Kasauli hills, topographically higher than the place where she led her previous life. It was in true sense her 'home' out of her 'house'. This new place was serene and reposeful which gave her a sense of superiority, and even her own identity. Here no one else could cast the power of his mind on her and render her mind as a passive, barren entity that exist almost like a vestigial organ. This identification of herself as no more the marginal 'other' in her previous life, freed her from the sting of her husband's phallo-narcissistic vision which always bade her attend to his needs oblivious of her own condition. Living alone amongst nature in Kasauli was like reinventing her space in the gynocentric cosmology. Nanda Kaul's friend Ila Das stands in contrast to her, owing to the fact that she never had what an Indian woman is expected to have. She was a spinster and faced financial crisis almost all through her life. Deviating from the usual norms she led a different life, which was not approved by the society. She refused to play her assigned role and therefore, conforming to the patriarchal justice, was brutally raped and murdered. Desai's portraiture of Raka is even more interesting because as a child she has been a silent witness to her mother's physical and mental torture at the hand of her father. Thus, she has turned into a lonely, sensitive child, always into the world of her own in her self-created exile. What Nanda had to acquire through utter disgust and extreme sense of alienation, moving through the alleys and by-lanes of life, for Raka, it was intuitive, something she was naturally. She was right from her childhood a rebel who developed an innate indifference to a society whose norms are dictated by males.

Desai's women characters in *Fire on the Mountain* stand defiant against the ascending patriarchy. They refuse to adhere to the tools of phallogocentric world that has left them silent, fragmented, fatigued and in despair. Although, it appears that at the end it is these women who suffer, it is actually their victory. They are hurt, killed, and left solitary forever no doubt, but their will remains unconquerable. Like the young Osbornian hero, they look back in anger, and stand upright, their spirits indifferent to the order of the 'phallus'. 'Home', in this novel becomes symbolic of the restrains and constrains imposed by the dominant ideologies of womanhood. It is a taboo in such a society to break the barriers and carve out a self-willed exit out of it. Women, undergoing immeasurable pain and facing oppressive male forces, can still fight till the end, coming out of the sacred grove designed for them. Yet, the distant possibility of being accepted in spite of it, seems to linger nowhere as the 'unwritten and unchanging' law (Kitto, 1962:17) of patriarchy that say either you follow or you are not here.

### **When Nation Becomes Equal to 'Home'**

The problematized concept of 'home' has been dealt subtly in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Migrant fictional narratives written by women writers have powerfully engaged the trails and trauma of adjustment to a different culture. There is forever a desire to be at home, to belong to home and the longing for the mystic sense of home. Middle-class Indian educated women abroad, married to upwardly mobile men, are regarded as the repository of "desi culture". Women are considered to be the stress relievers and make their men realize that nothing had changed within the four walls of the house even with the strong sense of uprootedness (Lal & Kumar, 2007:75). Home is a location of cultural freedom quite unlike the inevitable conservatism and claustrophobia. Brah rightly puts forward the question, "When does a location become home? What is the difference between 'feeling at home' and staking claim to a place as one's own? It is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhabit public proclamations of the place as home" (Brah, 1996:193).

Ashima's marriage to Ashoke who works in MIT, USA compels her to leave India and settle with her husband in USA. Her journey is different from that of Nanda Kaul. Ashima feels alienated in a different

nation and the author very pertinently puts the nation-home metaphor. Ashima's natal identity is confused and the concept of an ideal 'home' merges with her 'homeland' further complicating her existence. She misses her motherland, and everything associated with it and it almost becomes synonymous to missing her being at home. Life in America is both different and distant from home and the span of over two and half decades that she stayed, her isolation was not from the fact that she was bereft of the love of her husband and children, but because she could never make her household, a 'home'. Home symbolizes fond memories, nostalgia, a profound adherence and abode of expectations. She resembled Mrs. Sen, the alienated Indian housewife in America, in Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's," (Lahiri,1999:111) a short story in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Mrs. Sen could never get along with the modes of her life there and her acute desire to connect to her nation made her wait with bated breath for letters from India, look for fresh fishes that serve more as memory boosters than as delicacies, use blade glued to wooden handle instead of modern kitchen knives, and wear powder vermilion parting her hair along with floral printed saris. She was like a fish out of water that could never make her apartment her 'home'. Mostly Ashima's time is spent looking back to her days in the alleys and in her ancestral home in Kolkata. There is a trauma of separation and dislocation, which is an important aspect associated with migratory experience (Brah,1996:193).

Diaspora is a perpetual phenomenon in a woman's life. Diaspora embodies a subtext of 'home' (Brah, 1996:190). Home is a concept that is attached to the core of oneself. After living for years in a house, making it become the 'home' among the loved ones, it is so difficult for a woman to leave everything behind and move to make an alien household her own. To Ashima, it was even more difficult because she had to leave her country behind. An intense feeling of 'de-rootedness', living in a socially marginalized condition with a completely different cultural set up, made her realize the significance of her nation. Nation became the microcosmic 'home' and her existence a socially justified exile. The concept of Diaspora signals these processes of 'multi-locationality' across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries (Brah, 1996:194). There's always a longing back and after her husband's death Ashima chose to come back to India. It was the return of the native to her own world, her 'home'. Very few women can start anew because years and years of alienation rinse out the 'self' from them and it is really hard to regain the vitality over the prolonged passivity.

### **The Route to 'No Return'**

Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (1995) is another story of a journey, a young girl's journey through love, marriage, adultery, motherhood, repentance and death. Bhoomi, her name meaning 'earth', is fondly called Boonyi, a local word for a Kashmiri *chinar* tree. She enters into a love relationship with a Muslim boy Shalimar, who is initially a fun loving, carefree clown, excellent with his balancing act on a rope but fails to sustain it all through. Boonyi unlike other women in Pachigam, a small village in Kashmir (India), is confident and aware both of her physical beauty and talent. She understood that though Shalimar had immense love for her, yet there was a limitation attached to it forever. It was like an encroachment on her sense of free will, her space and her quality to excel in her art. Aptly, known as 'Anarkali' in her village, she is chosen to entertain the American Ambassador to India, Maximilian Ophuls. It is then that she realizes her ambitions and follows the way out of her home to the world outside. Boonyi's decision to give her life a new scope, ruins her marriage and eventually she ends up being Ophuls' mistress. Her image as a beloved wife, the angel of her 'home', is washed with the wave of her ambition. Boonyi's adulterous act, that changed the courses of quite a few lives, though not justifiable according to the moral standard, was her route beyond her home. Though she thought that by her action she had gained release from the village where she detested even her existence, yet the stirrings of her heart never let her escape the Kashmir embedded in her very being, her soul. Freedom was what Boonyi desired, "But free isn't free of charge." (253). The freedom that she chooses for herself is 'false freedom', an illusion, a bait to tempt her to sin, which she, "... like Eve, is easily tempted and eagerly accepts the Ambassador's offer of a change ..." (Mathur, 2007:92). Boonyi's urge for liberation took her out of her home – the sacred place sanctified by society and by her marriage to her husband Shalimar. The 'home' symbolizing security, honour and rightful rank of a wife, was lost, and as it is decreed, moving out of it, she was to be accepted only as an object to satiate lust. In a male dominated society, a woman leaving her house for her ambition, is never again re-absorbed, either she remains within the house

bearing the make believe bliss in the home, or she is brought to the market for sale. In either ways she is reduced to being just a commodity.

Boonyi's movement from her 'root' to a glazy route to fame and money, where from a wife she almost becomes a prostitute, selling her flesh like the by-product of her talent, took her far and far away from the peace of her 'home'. Even her little girl child was taken away from her because she did not fit the legal bill of society. Later, her return to the village only brought her more isolation. Her secluded life on a small hill, where she lived like a zombie, still waiting to be forgiven by her husband, grew lonelier with every passing day, until one fine day she is decapitated by Shalimar. There's no mercy, no consideration for a woman who has deviated from her assigned role. She cannot be assimilated like the 'prodigal son' (Luke, 15:11-32) once more in the 'home', since she has violated her sanctity, which is an unpardonable sin. Scales of justice are biased in the patriarchal social order – laws are different for a man and a woman. First of all, Boonyi outstretched herself beyond Shalimar. Then as a wife, she proved herself infidel, yet her guilt and suffering for years, living a desolate and solitary life for a long time, her detachment from her own daughter – all these did not work as a purgatorial fire enough to purify Boonyi's soul to be accepted once more by her husband. He had to hurl retribution on her. Being the representative of the macrocosmic male oriented society, he had to put her to death since there must not be such examples anymore. The way how should a woman lead her life, what should be her preoccupation, the extent she can decide things for herself - everything should conform to the order of the patriarchy. Since Boonyi is an exception, a deviation from the conventional woman, she is forever a castaway, and no more a member of a 'home'.

From these three fictional storylines, there are a couple of viewpoints we may arrive to. Firstly, 'home' as a concept, has in it certain laws that are not explicitly talked about, though they would not at all to be ignored. A woman who lives in the 'home' has to abide by certain rules even if they suffer the 'problem with no name'. If there is a tendency to cross the parameters of 'home' then infusing into the household is no more possible. And, moreover a woman not inhabiting a 'home' is either an exile, leading a secluded life totally alone or a whore; for society does not ascribe any other place for a woman.

### **Conclusion**

As a general criterion for women's liberation, equal participation in the productive and political affairs of society along with freedom from the sole responsibility for household and child care is utterly necessary. In society, there is still the survival of traditionalism and subordination of an individual to the family, and over emphasis on so called '*mul ani chul*', that is, children and hearth. To understand the position of a woman in such a complex situation, it is necessary to do more than comparison that they are an "oppressed class" or a "colonized group" (Omvedt, 1975:43).

Feminists have been using literature as a medium to suspect and subvert the established ideas so as to create effective belief systems. They argue that through thoughtful assessment of literary texts they bring out the essential oppression that women undergo and the passivity that gets developed because of it. The aim is to seek resource and strategies for dismantling stereotypical images that justify women's subordination and other forms of social inequality. Prior to feminist criticism, a reader was forced to read as a man, and thereby assimilate the male perspective. The feminists were resistive initially but later on there was an alternative female perspective that demonstrate concealed attitudes to femininity, and effectively promoted the understanding of alternate and subversive motifs. Yet, a very pertinent question still lingers. Is it possible that the feminist critics and academics really make a difference in the way society has been dealing with women? Understanding a literary text from the feminine perspective, identifying the patriarchal tools of oppression and domination, getting to the core of a woman's basic need as a conscious and sensible human being are not enough to eradicate the claustrophobia associated with her endangered social space.

This article is a minor attempt to point out what and when can a woman really identifies with herself and really feels that she is the angel of her 'home'. 'Home' is not only her refuge, her shelter, her abode of peace and security as well as herself-created world of bliss, but also a social construct where she is bound to perform and conform to the rules of patriarchy. This definitely suggests a possibility of rejuvenating ourselves and renewing with utmost interest the positive communication between the two sexes. Desire to express

oneself and the perseverance to strive at improving and extending our abilities both 'in' and 'beyond' our 'homes' will be our step towards our salvation though it shall still be another alternative contest for establishing dominant identities.

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