

## **Padma Desai's Autobiography "*Breaking Out: An Indian Woman's American Journey*": As a Social Discourse**

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Literature primarily focuses on man's quest for self and at the same time also serves as a mirror to the society. Different genres of literature, from time immemorial, have reflected and revealed before the readers such un-trodden territories of the societies and peoples they may never come across during their life-span. In complex societies having a multi-layered structure like that of India, autobiographies, a highly-popular and research-worthy literary genre, help in identifying the interrelationships of various stakeholders of a society and also pin-point the social dogmas and general outlook of the people and institutions. They portray the journey of the writers focusing on the way they have negotiated the challenging and at times foreboding social situations. This process of negotiating the helpful as well as hostile societal forces leading to an understanding of the self has been expressed aptly in an observation made by Gupta and Nanda: "For most literary writers creating the self within the page becomes a negotiation between the I and Thou, the self and the other, the individual and the community" (2). Thus, an autobiography as a literary genre serves effectively as a social discourse on the society in which the writer has lived and breathed.

Discourse, as defined by French social theorist Michel Foucault, refers to:

"...ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern." (108 as quoted in Weedon).

Sociologists are of the opinion that a discourse emerges out of relations of power, because those in control of institutions control their formation. In this sense, power, knowledge and discourse are strongly connected and work together to create hierarchies. In simpler terms, a

discourse refers to how we think and communicate about people, things, the social organization of society, and the relationships among and between all three. Discourse typically emerges out of social institutions. Padma Desai's autobiography, due to an informal and first-hand comparative analysis of the two societies of India and the US as its central concern, surfaces as an effectual illustration of a social discourse.

Padma Desai, born in 1931, was brought up under such conditioning that was meant and designed to prepare her to play the role of an ideal daughter-in-law in future. Her father, though a crusader against the hateful traditions of dowry and bride burning prevalent in their community to a great extent, was not modern enough to permit his daughter to bloom and grow according to her wish. As a result, Padma, who had dreams of excelling academically and reaching out to stars, as she puts it, saw no alternative but "to fight silently and stubbornly each step of the way..." (x).

The writer has witnessed and experienced the two very different worlds of India and America from very close quarters and is therefore, able to present the problems, the maze of relationships, the cumbersome traditions and norms or lack of them, the freedom and opportunities, equality or bias to gender identity underlying the two societies very convincingly and authentically. The knowledge of the two societies has assisted her in looking at her own life, decisions and relationships in a neutral and factual manner. Her life-writing, depicting a highly inspirational journey of an Indian woman, as a piece of literature, confirms the opinion expressed by Arnold and Blackburn: "life stories are exemplary stories and, whatever the exact manner of their presentation, are perceived to have an inner core of social, moral or spiritual veracity" (16-17).

At the very outset of the book, in the preface itself, the writer makes it very clear to the readers that this book is the story of her 'transformation'. This transformation, here, implies that of a young girl coming from an uncertain, fearful and orthodox environment of India into a freer, relaxed and contributing individual of society as an American woman. The preface of the book serves as a kind of introduction to her life and a comparative study between two different sets of cultures, norms, traditions and practices followed in Indian and American societies.

The highly conducive atmosphere of America that is known for its unflinching support to intelligent aspirants and its power to attract a pool of talents proves to be a liberating influence on Padma. It turns out to be the world of her imaginings and aspirations offering her abundant opportunities to grow. Her academic ambitions bloom enabling her to accomplish herself as a connoisseur in the field of Russian economy.

Padma's journey that had begun from a town of India where the parents prided over giving good dowry to marry off their daughters; takes her through a progression of events and experiences that prove to be a new rung of the ladder that she must climb to reach to the top. Her marginalization in Mumbai as 'a girl from Surat', her disillusioning encounters with the male-dominated Indian society at Delhi University and the court of justice, her stay at Harvard and finally her interaction with the inspiring environment of the US- all prove to be a new kind of learning experience in her life and mould her into an established individual.

It is very important for an individual to develop the kind of maturity with which he/she can take right decisions about critical issues of their lives. Such maturity cannot come on its own, it has to be developed through frank and honest interactions and opinions shared among family members and group of peers that act as guiding light for the person whenever one finds oneself in a similar situation. Such a relationship between a child and parents was unimaginable in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even today, in majority of Indian families girls are married off in a hurry as if the family is looking forward to getting rid of her before anything untowardly happens in her life. This passive role of a family is voiced by the writer in elaborate and apt terms: "...the distinction between sexual permissiveness and prohibition, between promiscuity and prudery, between coquetry and shyness was not part of my upbringing" (78).

When living in India, the writer was stuck between the clutches of the age-old customs of the society that had moulded a mind-set that considered following customs laid for a duty-bound daughter and the world of freedom, desires and passions that she had come face to face in Mumbai. On one hand, the traditions, laid down centuries ago, expected her to enter into a sexual relationship only after the relationship had been approved by families through the sacred matrimonial ceremony; while on the other hand, her intelligent and logical mind, and the

emotions that she had been engulfed by left her no choice but to follow her heart. Tormented and torn by such contradicting emotions, the first experience of sexual intimacy for her with RB, felt like “a hideous convulsion expelling me defaced and deflowered into a world of guilt and shame, despoiled of innocence, of faith, of bliss” (81).

It was as if once she had violated the norms of the society, a woman could not be further trusted with taking any other decision related to her life. If looked at from a different angle of a literary critic, the situation resembles that of a Shakespearean or Marlowean tragedy, where even a minor weakness would prove to be destructive and potent enough to lead the protagonist to his/her doom. When Padma was married off soon after her final exam, there was no usual show of the mother’s eyes welling with tears or the mood of joy or festivity that such occasions in Indian surroundings inspire. What she had done was already embarrassing enough for the family, now there was no scope for her on giving a second thought to her life ahead. She comments: “It did not matter if I was given away in matrimony or got rid off. There was no turning back” (82).

The readers get to know a different point of view of a modern day young woman when the writer juxtaposes her own opinion of an unwanted pregnancy that she and her husband had decided to abort decades ago. Her daughter, born and brought up in a free and modern society of America comes up with complicating issues like whether the writer felt in any way that she had been raped by her husband and if the decision to abort the child was all her own or she had acted under some pressure. This reference to an altogether different view by an American young woman poses two angles to be given some serious consideration: One, it brings out on one hand the difference in the thinking patterns of two distinct societies where one is still led by age-old customs and traditions whereas the other approaches every issue with an intellectual, independent and logical mind. Two, it also makes us aware of the simplicity with which Indians tackle critical problems related to their lives without unnecessarily complicating them with fringe issues like exploitation, independence and freedom of an individual. Indian society in general and Indians as individuals, tend to look at the issues in their wholeness and not in fragments. This, at times, could prove to be a strength as it did in the writer’s life at the time of her abortion.

Introducing the one family member to whom the writer feels very close to and indebted, though there was actually no blood relation between the two, is her Kaki, the paternal aunt. The writer feels that if she were to charge God with a case as Virginia Woolf referred to in the case of Christina Rossetti, she would make her Kaki a witness. It is interesting to note the comparison between the two different sets of individuals belonging to altogether different worlds, times and cultures, but passing through a gamut of experiences that are remarkably similar. Christina Rossetti, the sister of Dante Gabriel, had been raised under an environment of strict moral code and became a victim of emotional repression, social constraints, nervous breakdowns and wrote sad poetry.

Kaki, as embodied in the words of the writer, represents the plight of widows in India of the 50s. The conditions after that have not improved much. The urban India can now boast of equal footing and rights to women, be it wives or widows, but in rural areas, the widows, having no base of any sort-education, finance, social independence- still continue to have the same fate and lead a life conditioned by the age-old norms set by the male dominated society. The writer, in very effective words, brings to fore the situation prevalent in India of the time, “More than three-quarters of a century ago, everyone was a prisoner of ironclad practices that were laid down several centuries before” (49).

The writer’s exposure to the West had supplied her with a new-found lens through which she could view the reality of Kaki’s purposeless existence that had been forced by the age-old customs of the society and could not reconcile with it and accept it. This is evident from her outburst when she returned to India for the first time after Kaki’s death and confronts her father with questions like how he, who had experienced free societies like England, could allow Kaki to lead a dreadful life. Widows were and are still in many parts of India pushed to and kept at the fringe of social life and are not considered even worthy of participating in many religious and social rituals. The society has created specific norms as to the kind of clothes they are to wear, the kind of life they are to lead controlling and restricting every move of these ill-destined individuals. This sort of marginalization is highly culture-specific as is pointed out by Singh:

The question of margin i.e. margin/al/ized/ation is related to identity and self. Identity, self and individual have been major concerns of individualistic societies like the West, and not India where annihilation or the surrender of the self has been the ideal to achieve. (Singh 11)

The writer's exposure to American life puzzles the writer as to why in India we cannot follow the American practice of remarrying. She agrees that these are the matters that transcend cross-cultural boundaries. The writer while pondering what she would do if left alone in later life, also focuses on the dark side of living in an American society. She clearly understands and accepts the facts that unlike India, social life in America is very formal and structured around couples. As a result, a widow or a single woman remains at a disadvantage as the writer points out, "risks being left at the margin of social interaction" (54).

There is even a greater generational divide between parents and children in American families and such exclusionary practices make every single person, either male or female, looking for a partner in life. Her exposure to American society and life has endowed the writer with a greater understanding of the beliefs and practices that the two societies have followed for decades. A very apt observation by her showing the contrast in the attitudes of the two societies is:

...the robust American notion of 'moving on', allowing people to keep memories intact or shed them, has an edge over the Indian alternative of 'life goes on' that is hitched to the past. The former involves a choice whereas the latter inhibits it. (54)

The Indian family system may have its own virtues, but it is not perfect as no system can be. The hierarchical family norms teach the children in Indian families to obey and follow the tradition and they try to attend to the needs of their old parents, but there are numerous examples where the children may choose to differ from the norms and do not want any involvement or interference of their parents in their lives. In America, the writer has come across many such examples where women look after their elderly widowed parents.

The writer, having witnessed two different cultures and life styles, has been able to look at some of the wrong practices of Indian society from a neutral point of view. An extreme example of female suppression was right in front of her eyes in the form of her Kaki, whose widowhood had snatched away all the normalcy of life she used to live. These experiences have made her value the freedom American society gives to its citizens, especially women. That could be the reason she has preferred to call her autobiography ‘Breaking out’- a breaking out of the old bondages, customs, and chains.

The term ‘breaking out’ used in the title symbolises breaking the chains of age-old customs and orthodox norms of Indian society prevalent at the time; many of which still have a stronghold on the lives of the young girls and women living here. In the preface of the book itself, writer declares the autobiography as the story of her transformation. This transformation, here, involves the conversion of a young Indian girl hailing from a provincial town of just-independent India brought up in a conventional, fearful and exacting environment into an independent, self-sufficient and noteworthy member of society as an American academician. Her journey not only gives the readers a peep into her emotional and academic progression but also serves as a comparative analysis of two totally different worlds exhibiting a diverse set of practices and customs.

Padma’s sincere and straightforward account of her life has highlighted the ills still pervading the Indian society as far as the issues related to women are concerned who are treated as ‘second class’ citizens only. The life-stories of this kind that present not only a truthful picture of our society but also give us a glimpse of other societies like those of the West, provide a comparative outlook with which the position of women in our culture can be viewed from a neutral platform and measures to be taken can be contemplated on. In this regard, it would be interesting to study Ranjana Harish’s remarks pointing out the distinction between the autobiographies penned down by men and women. Using the allegory of footprints for autobiographical writings of women, the well-known academician recognises:

Agreed that the sands available to these women are that of periphery. Agreed that the feet which leave the prints on them are those of females and so the impressions on

the sands are different, different from the ones found on the sands around the centre.

(Harish xiii)

When a woman, who has a first-hand experience of the marginal treatment of a tradition-bound society like India, decides to depict her life journey, the outcome is definitely a true-to-life picture of the surroundings and the situations as can be seen in Padma Desai's story of her life.

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