ON 'SURVIVAL' OF THE FEMALE LEADS IN INDIAN FEMINIST WRITINGS

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Abstract: Indian feminist literature deals with most of the practical problems that women face in the society and most often it is related to the issues of identity crisis in a patriarchal world. This paper attempts a comparative study of four major fictions, *That Long Silence*, *Cry the Peacock*, *The God of Small Things*, *Ladies Coupe* (most of them award winning) and one short story "The Mantras of Love" and examines some of the issues associated with the theme of "survival" of the female lead in these fictional narratives, in general, as a reflection of a nation's literature, applying the victim positions and the survival modes which Margaret Atwood had formulated in her *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Atwood identifies three modes of Survival: "Bare Survival", "Grim Survival" and "Crippled Success". If in the postmodern Can Lit, this analysis is a sort of what may be called as a 'Cultural survival,' in Indian feminist writings, it is a 'survival' of female identity and the idea behind the application of these victim positions to the female protagonists is to bring out how they face the identity crisis. Jaya in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* occupies Atwood's Victim position 2 (not a *fated* victim) and Maya and Ammu, female leads of Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* respectively assume Victim position 3, Akhila in *Ladies Coupe* assumes Victim position 4 and the protagonist in "Mantras of Love", that of a 'crippled success' and more likely to be in victim position 1

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Introduction: Human identity is mostly intertwined and defined on the strictures of the social and cultural norms of the society and when it comes to the identity crisis of a woman, she is always labeled in ratios of relationships with man. Even the scriptures like the Bible teach us that the first woman, Eve, was created out of the ribs of the first man, Adam (Gen, 2.21-2.22). In a patriarchal Indian society, a woman is always delineated and foundered by the institutions of marriage and family which determine a woman's success in the society, as well as her stability and merit as a 'woman'. This is perhaps in consort with the bizarre idea of "*Nastreeswathanthryamarhati"* in the *Manusmruti* that the whole class of Indian women are continuously bonded to just three 'respectable' roles- that of a daughter, wife or mother in society. This may be one reason why the prominent feminist Indian writings are crisply netted in the frame- works of family and marriage. The feminist critics opine that while sex is an anatomical distinction, gender is a social construct, where there are separate codes foregrounding and conditioning the 'other'- here, the female gender.

This gender dissonance that feminist literary theory concentrates could be wholly summarized in Simone de Beauvoir's words, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (295). Indian English feminist works of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been abounding through this view, especially so, as in the novels of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Anita Nair. This paper examines some of the issues associated with the theme of "survival" of the female lead in these fictional narratives, in general, as a reflection of a nation's literature, applying the victim positions and the survival modes which Margaret Atwood had formulated in her *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*.

Margaret Atwood, the prolific Canadian writer explains how, as a child, she was enthralled to read comics like Captain Marvel, Plastic Man and Batman. She also claims that she was learning at that age what to expect from books like *Alice in Wonderland* or Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* and other such tales of fantasia where one goes through a set of adventures and returns home safely; but, Charles D. Roberts' *Kings in Exile* or Ernest Thompson Seton's *Wild Animals I have known*, which dealt with animals "caged, trapped and tormented", provided her a different reading experience – it was "upsetting" because these animals never returned home; These animal stories were real and not fantasy and they were related not to "circus" but real "jungle" life. Seton's book, for Atwood, was much like a "survival manual" which focused on the wild animal's escape from dying, who is at the "continuous peril of being killed" even if it escapes another, which is in actual the very essence of Canadian literature. Atwood notes that Canada is pulled apart by its marginalized status and lack of recognition on one side and its continuous struggle against the wild landscape and the rough sea on the other, which creates for Canada, its central symbol - "Survival," as it appears in most Canadian English and Canadian French literature- *la Survivance*. "Survival", here, may also mean surviving from a calamity or a disaster, like a hurricane, or wreck which is manifest in themes like, as she would say, "grim survival" which most of the Canadian

French poems contain. She identifies three modes of Survival: "Bare Survival", "Grim Survival" and "Crippled Success".

Atwood remarks that the history of a country is intimately connected with the ideas reflected in its popular literature. Hence, it can be well argued then that the feminist Indian writings also voice the same- in the patriarchal Indian society a woman is born and grown up only to be docile, so as to fit in snugly into the framework of such institutions like marriage and family,because a woman's life, irrespective of her background, educational or professional status, is intricately related with familial bondage of love and affection. It is this idea that forms the pivotal thread in most Indian English feminist writings where women are pulled between their compliance towards their family and their creativity for freedom because female emotions are like suppressed volcanoes, they need to be hot and fuming in matters of individuality but have to be dormant while adjusting in their families and it is this union of opposing ideas which marks the very often psychological catastrophe in most Indian feminist fictional landscape. Broadly speaking, feminist writing in India is a revolt against the stereo typing of women by androcentric writers. It has to be specially noted that few stories have happy endings rather, they are all portrayals of struggle to survive with their own individuality on one pole, and the adjustment that they have to procure in a perverted patriarchal society, on the other. If in the postmodern Can Lit, this is a sort of what may be called as 'Cultural survival,' in Indian feminist writings, it is a 'survival' of female identity. Relating these victim positions in the context of the Indian feminist literature, it could be easily identified that the question of "survival" probed here is largely centered on the issues of identity crisis.

***That Long Silence*:** Shashi Deshpande's Sahitya Akademi award winning novel, *That Long Silence* portrays the struggle of both the lower as well as the upper class women to survive in their family circles. While the lower class women have to struggle from quite an early age for food and other means of survival, till their last breath, the upper class women have more of a freedom of choice, a better standard of living, but nevertheless they are also never free from torments on the mental and psychological level, if not on the physical level as those of the lower class, which is imposed upon them by the patrilocal polity of the Indian society. *That Long Silence* is a gripping narrative of Jaya and Mohan whose marital journey of seventeen years is described as "a pair of bullocks yoked together" (8). We get to know that married women are never encouraged to think outside the relationships of husband, children and family. For instance, Vanitamami speaks to Jaya, about the importance of being with a husband: "Remember, Jaya ... a husband is like a sheltering tree .... Without the tree, you're, dangerously unprotected and vulnerable" (32). It is this very psychological input that clutches hold of most marital women that they endlessly endure the torments that they are subjected to, which eventually leads to a loss of feminine identity whereby they attain a passive stance and get reduced to a domestic animal for their husbands. Bijay Kumar Das studies the novel as a portrayal of the contemporary Indian woman who becomes a victim of circumstances and revolts against patriarchy. It can be established that a name contributes heavily to a person's identity and it is this very identity that her husband wishes to change, by adopting for her, a new name "Suhasini" which, he thinks, encompasses in it all the subtlety of an 'Indian' wife. Jaya's father had brought her up quite boldly and had kept her name Jaya determinedly because it meant the 'unconquered'. *That Long Silence* reflects Jaya's resentment in the identity crisis that 'Suhasini' faces and the metaphorof silence as resentment operates throughout the novel. At last she decides to break this long silence "to plug that hole in the heart"; she says, "I'll have to speak, to listen, I'll have to ease that long silence between us", (192). This metaphorical silence is socio-psychic in nature, and Deshpande's protagonists move from despair to hope, from self- negligence to self-assertion. So, Deshpande seems to give the message that "women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their own victimization .... It is only through self-analysis and self-understanding, through vigilance and courage; they can begin to change their lives." (Usha, 133). Such changes or drastic transformations do not happen abruptly. In other words, Jaya puts it more simply, "We don`t change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything to know now it is this: life has always to be made possible" (193). Jaya is a victim who repudiates the victim role. She assumes Atwood's Victim position three: "To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable. As in: "Look what's being done to me, and it isn'tFate, it isn't the Will of God. Therefore I can stop seeing myself as a *fated* Victim." (Atwood, 34).

***Cry the Peacock*:** Anita Desai's, Sahitya Akademi award winning debut novel, *Cry the Peacock*, (pub.1963) considered as a trend-setter in feminist writing (Anita Sharma, 1) is also a novel featuring on identity crisis mainly on the emotional and psychological aspects of femininity. Maya, the protagonist after completing her 'girlish' phase as a pampered daughter of her protective father enters

her 'womanistic' phase as the wife of a practical and worldly person, Gautama whose "understanding was scant, love was meager."(89). Anita Desai carefully sketches her characters in their inner depths, notwithstanding the external social and familial ties they are bound to. Maya is a victim of certain obsessions as well as an astrologer's prediction of the death of one of the two- her own, or her husband's- after four years of their marriage. Her obsession with death, her father- fixation and her marital discords are the three strands which interweaves the plot. It is Maya's identity crisis which brings on her disaster and she fervently looks on the societal role model constructs - her brother, father and husband to save her from this psychological predicament and cries," Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my savior? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying," (84). But, nobody comes to her rescue; her predicament can be linked to her failure in finding a refuge either in marriage or in family.

Atwood's remarks on "Survival" are noteworthy in this context,

"A preoccupation with one's survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival. In earlier writers, these obstacles are external - the land, the climate, and so forth. In later writers the obstacles tend to become both harder to identify and more internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical survival but, obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being. Sometimes fear of these obstacles becomes itself the obstacle, and a character is paralyzed by terror (either of what he thinks is threatening him from the outside, or of elements in his own nature that threaten him from within). It may even be life itself that he fears; and when life becomes a threat to life, you have a moderately vicious circle (28)."

It is this very traumatic predicament which paralyzes Maya's chances of "Survival".

***The God of Small Things*:** Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, concentrates on the destiny of the protagonist, Ammu, who is a divorcee. The novel expounds around the basic desire of human beings- to love and to be loved. In most cases, women are denied their right of love and are often reduced to just sex tools of men. Women are often seen just as bodies without hearts. It is in response to this attitude that Roy works her pen constructing Ammu, as rebellious, ardent, passionate and revolting. Ammu's revolt is explicit when she leaves Ayemenam and marries Chacko, not because she loves him, but as part of her determination to escape from Kottayam; as a child she had been a passive spectator to the physical and mental oppressions, her father used to inflict on her typically submissive mother. She again revolts when she found that her husband inclines to the wishes of his boss, Mr. Hollicks to bait her in bed for the job opportunities that he would get in return. The lack of freedom and helplessness of women is obvious, even in the inequality of inheritance of property, when her brother, Chacko says that "whatever is mine is mine and whatever is yours is also mine." It is also obvious when her aunt, Baby Kochamma "subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter-according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage—Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject" (22). Roy also ascertains feminine sensuality through Ammu's love for Velutha after her divorce that women too have needs to be gratified, be it, physical or psychological, sexual or emotional. Ammu's very step to defy the conventional standards makes her a New Woman, but, she does not emerge successful in achieving her goals. Arundhati Roy's Ammu and Anita Desai's Maya assume Atwood's victim position two:

"*To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology(in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea"*(33).

While Maya was a victim of psychological problems, Ammu was a victim of gender inequality and social oppressions. Ammu's case would not have been a failure if she did not die and had survived in the society, instead of succumbing to death, heart-broken.

Ladies Coupe: Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* also strives in this identity crisis where the forty- five year old, spinster Akhilandeswari or Akhila, who works as a clerk, bursts open her protective shackles and travels all alone by train to Kanyakumari. The author asks: "So, who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity?" (84). Nobody even called her by name. Even her mother didn't call her Akhila but 'Ammadi' and her colleagues called her 'madam.' "She was always an extension of someone else's identity. Chandra's daughter; Narayan's Akka; Priya's aunt; Murthy's sister-in-law . . . Akhila wished for once someone would see her as a whole being" (200-201). This journey is a chance for Anita as she strives out to find out the answer that has been drudging deep within her- does woman really need the company of a man to remain happy and content in life; it is a symbol of the Indian woman's search for strength and independence. The very title *Ladies*

Coupe referring to the segregated second class compartment found on the Indian overnight trains till 1998 is about 'ordinary women and their indomitable spirit' (*Ladies Coupe*, vii). Although, her friend Karpagam had given her the motive to give references to her choice, she leaves her family as "nobody" no body's daughter, nobody's sister. Nair's acute observations on gender politics can be observed when Akhila reads the sign board in front of the ticket counter, "Ladies, senior citizens and handicapped persons" (*Ladies Coupe,* 6). The metaphors of speech and silence have powerfully established in this novel how a family, the very basic symbol of patriarchy silences a woman and wipes away her identity as a woman. Akhila is often tried to be silenced by her family on grounds that she is crossing her limits and this "silencing" operates itself through "overt and covert taboos" (Abraham, 119). The novel wades through different experiences of different women whose experiences with life are very much unique on the one hand, but common on the other, especially so on the gender dissonances imposed on them by the patriarchal leverages.

Once Akhila reaches the Kanniyakumari beach, she hooks a man, has a relationship with him where she masters the sexual scene and it fills in her a triumph that she is the dominant in this role. But, at the end of the game, we realize that even this attempt to ascertain that she plays the dominant role in the hunter-prey game, perverting the conventional sexual notions, exploiting her feminist ideologies to prove that she has used her body for her own sexual gratifications, because it is not to Akhila the woman that the man comes, but to Akhila the female body and the fact that he does not even know her name, nor cares to know, itself reveals that she has failed in her attempt to become a New Woman. "As Luce Irigaray observes ". . . the way for women to be liberated is not by 'becoming a man' or by envying what men have and their objects, but by female subjects once again valorizing the expressions of their own sex and gender" (122). But the fact is that "Akhila becomes neither man nor woman—as patriarchy does she too gives primacy to the female body, reduces herself to mere corporeal entity and thereby devalues her own integrity" (Abraham, 135-136). Akhila is a victim position 4 who prefers to be "a creative non victim"- a position for ex-victims where they can exploit their creative best (35). But, in so defining herself, becomes the very victim, a loss of feminine integrity by distorted conceptions about sex, marriage, and relationships.

"Mantras of Love": *She Writes* is a collection of short stories by different writers, all based on the central theme – experience. And as Oscar Wilde has it, "experience is the name every one gives to their mistakes". Most of the stories portray the failure of the female protagonists in the equations of love, sex, marriage, family and children. "Mantras of Love" a short story by YisheyDoma could be linked to Atwood's theme of crippled success. It is a story of a young girl Yangchen who falls in love with a foreigner, Philip Bryson among the hills of the Dewachen, where among the Sikkim hills about three dozen monks personify different manifestations of deities and dance in tune with the music of drums and cymbals to commemorate the birth of Padmasambhava, founder of Lamaism – a festival ever since 1670, every summer. They had met each other during such an occasion and had not missed out a single festival ever after. They were both very happy together and Yangchen had come two months earlier, this time, so that she could go ahead with the preparations of their much awaited twenty-fifth year celebrations, but as fate has it, the "bash turned out to be something different" (113). She received a phone call only to hear that Philip was no more and he would never ever come back to be together with her,to lose themselves in the "hark back to Sikkim's pagan past" (103) at Dewachan. This time she trekked alone to Dzongri, to be at the feet of Dzonga, to perform her lover's last rites. Neither his body nor his ashes were there; only the sweet memories of twenty-four years of happy living together.

Conclusion: Atwood says that she has taken sample plots from both prose and poetry for the analysis and reflects that the themes operating in these open up to yet another "facet of Survivalism: at some point the failure to survive, or the failure to achieve anything beyond survival, becomes not a necessity imposed by a hostile outside world but a choice made from within. Pushed far enough, the obsession with surviving can become the will *not* to survive" (Atwood, 68). The same can be assumed of Indian feminist writings too. Atwood observes that most of the Canadian authors spend time to consciously or unconsciously make their central characters suffer, die or fail miserably because something outside this is not supported by the nations' identity or the concurrent practices of the Canadian society and hence an ending outside this is not appropriate and seeming because most Can Lit is a reflection of Canada as a "collective victim" (69). Likewise, since the entire feminine gender is a collective victim in India orbiting around on the institutions of marriage and family, the feminist writings mostly do not have a climax, in which their heroines are successes. Such an idea of success still appears quite obscure, very unreal to them in a patriarchal perverted modern, yet, conventional Indian society.

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