

‘The Individual Vs The Wife’ – The Inner Conflict in the Selected Characters of Anita Desai & Margaret Laurence

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Abstract: The most common theme in both Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence, the eminent writers is human relationship. Almost all the novels of both writers are spun around women who are highly individualistic or in vehement search of their Individualism which in turn affects their marital life, i.e., being a wife. Be it India or Canada or any part of the world the wives are generally expected to be in accord with the husband and the husband’s family. Almost all the wife characters in Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence are in a great conflict between the mundane ‘wife-ism’ and their own ‘individualism’, and this paper aims at bringing out the nuances of this conflict. Both the writers never fit themselves into the traditional models; they take routine life incidents to prove something universal. For instance Nanda Kaul of Anita Desai’s “Fire on the Mountain” is a great grandmother, leads a reclusive life and thinks she quenches her thirst of living an independent life in carignano, where as the nonagenarian Hagar Shipley of Margaret Laurence’s “The Stone Angel” leads a stubborn life throughout and even resists water at her deathbed and dies. Both Nanda and Hagar hated the Wives inside them but they never tried to escape the wifely duties and at the same time they nurtured their individualism. Not alone Nanda and Hagar the older generation women but even Maya of Anita Desai and Stacey MacAindra of Margaret Laurence the middle aged women face the same hardships of being a wife and try to pave their own way to find their individuality. Both the writers in their novels with the touch of feminist concern try to show ‘the wife’ as a restriction to the woman ‘individuality’.

[S. Patchainayagi, S. Parvin Banu. ‘The Individual Vs The Wife’ – The Inner Conflict in the Selected Characters of Anita Desai & Margaret Laurence. *Rep Opinion* 2013;5(7):54-58]. (ISSN: 1553-9873). <http://www.sciencepub.net/report>. 8

Keywords: Marriage, Conflict, Anita Desai, Margaret Laurence, Individualism, wife, Nonagenarian, Failed Marriage.

“Marriage means Expectations and Expectations means conflict”

-Paxton Blair.

Conflict is the struggle between the opposing forces on which the action in a work of literature depends. There are five basic forms of conflict: person versus person, person versus self, person versus nature, person versus society, and person versus God. The term inner conflict is the interchangeable simple term for intrapersonal conflict which means the conflict that occurs solely within the psychological dynamics of an individual’s own mind. Inner conflict is sensed through the presence of conflictive inner dialogues, opposing thoughts, feelings, preferences, beliefs, and/or values that occur within the psyche of an individual. Internal conflict exists when a character struggles with an ethical or emotional challenge. Internal conflict can be smelled when a character is constantly asking himself or herself "Am I doing the right thing?" or "Should I speak out against this behavior?" and the inner conflict that a character experiences will usually represent a question about

moral behavior within societies and among humankind. It reaches the level of problematic inner conflict when an individual experiences it as a pattern with enough frequency, duration, and distressing intensity as to strongly wish they didn’t have it. Serious and devalitizing *intrapersonal conflict* is vastly under-recognized as a source of human pain and suffering, and as a major obstacle to individual fulfillment, satisfaction and enjoyment. This conflict forms the canvass for both Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence in which they adorn their paintings with psychological nuances.

Human brain or the psyche is one of their favorite subjects and almost all the woman protagonists of both the writers undergo this inner conflict. As the definition goes ‘wife’ is a married woman, be it India or Canada wives are generally expected to be in accord with the husband and the husband’s family. The problems of women are different from those that of men. One can find both in Anita Desai’s and Margaret Laurence’s women characters, an inner conflict between ‘the wife and the individual’. Almost all the women characters of

both writers are in vehement search of their own individuality. Especially with the cases of wives, they feel that the term 'wife' and the responsibilities as wife a great hindrance to establish their individuality.

Women of various age groups and of different social classes have different problems in establishing their individuality but the trauma they undergo is the same. Both Desai and Laurence have delineated these problems through their protagonists of various age groups ranging from 90 years to 25 years and they are also of different social classes. Desai with the wives in the Indian settings and Laurence with the wives in Canadian settings cull out the trauma of being a wife who is neither respected nor loved. The real problem of the women protagonists is they could neither live with the 'hood' nor could remove it.

NANDA KAUL of 'Fire on the Mountain' the great grandmother lives a life of recluse in Carignano. She was busy all throughout her life caring and rearing children, inviting guests, making arrangements for dinner and tea, hosting a party and always ready in a silk attire to engage guests as the wife of 'the vice chancellor'. Now at her old age she lives in a mountain cliff with the servant RAM LAL and takes even a phone call as a great intrusion. Great grandmothers, generally, will be happy to receive their great grandchildren but she treats 'RAKA' a great disturbance in her secluded life. Even when she is middle aged as a busy wife of the vice chancellor she use to get into her room in the afternoons closing the door by which she thinks she has shut the world out. She closes her eyes, of course her ears are open to the cries of the babies, the enquiry of the visitors, quarrel among the children, the talkativeness of the servants but she remains still for an hour. And after an hour she opens the door through which she enters the mundane world again to do her daily routines. Now at this age she thinks that she had rehearsed in those afternoons for such a reclusive life and she wants no one to disturb her. Nanda is not an introvert but she behaves so because she was deceived. She was respected as the wife of the Vice Chancellor but she was not loved by the Vice Chancellor, as he was in love with a Christian tutor of the same college. For the fear of family's culture, name and fame, he did not marry the tutor but lived with her. Nanda could not resist marriage nor could fight for her rights as a wife; maybe she thought it is not the question of rights but the matter of love. She hated the wifely status but could not come out of her household. Only at her older age she was able to lead the life in the way which she wanted.

Same ways HAGAR SHIPLEY of Margaret Laurence's 'The Stone Angel' is a nonagenarian lives with her son MARVIN and daughter-in-law DORIS who themselves are in their sixties. They feel that they can no more take care of the old mother and its better for her to be in 'Silver Threads' an old age home cum hospital but she resists that, she goes to the extent of escaping the house to 'Shadow point' where no one lives. Hagar the only daughter of JASON CURRIE a Presbyterian store keeper loves BRAM SHIPLEY an ordinary farmer and takes her first flight from home. Soon she understands Bram is a peculiar man who loves to be with horses rather than being in a cozy living room with decent furniture. She gives birth to Marvin and JOHN but loves John more dearly because Marvin is bit clumsy. She takes John with her as she parted Bram and moves to MR. OATLEY as his housekeeper, but with Bram she denied housekeeping. She is always ready to do her wifely duties but she hated herself to be a wife. This is may be because she dared to love and marry Bram rather 'uncouth' for her family but she could not change him a bit or continue to live with him. When Bram is ill she comes back to MANAWAKA and when she goes back after his death and informs Oatley that her brother is dead. Even for the first time when she meets Oatley she introduces herself as a widow. Hagar is a proud Presbyterian and wanted to lead a decent life. But Bram never fitted himself into her circuit and there was no bright light in their life. Of course at her deathbed she inwardly longs for Bram's nearness, not as a wife but as a lover. When Bram is dead she is not worried that much, for that matter she never cared for anyone's death except her son John's death. Even at this age of ninety she tried to live alone which proved negative. At last she understands the life as to love and to be loved and to achieve this, bits of compromises are needed then and there. Though she understands, she could not compromise even while admitted in the hospital where she resists a glass of water from the nurse and dies.

Unlike Nanda who finished her wifely duties perfectly, Hagar refused to be a wife and goes away. Both the old ladies hated to be a wife and throughout their life they searched for their individuality. Though towards the end they are not happy, they found what they wanted.

Coming to the younger wives MAYA of 'Cry the peacock' by Anita Desai is the wife of GAUTAMA who is twice older than her, indeed a friend of her father. Maya is the pet and pampered child of RAI SHAHIB who readily accepted Gautama as her husband expecting him to treat her

like her father did. But things were entirely different; Gautama is a skeptic and never gives attention to emotions. Unlike Maya he is a man of brains and not of hearts. Maya is deprived of sexual pleasures and has no off shoots. She longs for the affection of her husband which he neglects. Maya weeps and feels a lot at the death of TOTO her pet dog which annoys Gautama. It is very Normal that childless women get closer to their pets and it is not a surprise that Maya took Toto as her child which her husband failed to understand. Slowly a sort of depression accumulates in Maya and when that is the fourth year of their marriage she remembers the ALBINO'S words 'either you or your husband' will be dead. At nights whenever she hears cries of the peacock during mating she thinks of her own relationship with her husband. As peacocks tear themselves after mating, Maya, in a fret of Psychic disorder, murders Gautama. Maya as a wife is never been recognized by her husband. The basic instinct of marital relationship is not quenched in the case of Maya; she herself says "Gautama never understands my hot flesh and the blue veins running under it."

Similarly STACEY of the 'Fire Dwellers' by Margaret Laurence is the wife of MAC AINDRA and the mother of four children. Stacey was very beautiful with a nice structure which made Mac fall in love with her. She elopes with Mac betraying her family. They started happily but after few years, a sort of dissatisfaction started running across the family. Now Mac tries to put his whole concentration into his business, rather he feels sorry that even before getting a start in business he fell in love with Stacey and eloped. He is now of a thought that because of the hasty decision, he could not lead a successful life. But Stacey is of different opinion; she often looks at the mirror and is largely worried about her extra fittings in the hip, shoulders and neck. She is of the feeling that only because of her bulky figure Mac hates her. Both of them feel that they could not reconcile at bed. Stacey is not after men and sexual pleasures but she always wanted someone to be crazy about her and this instinct is inborn quality of her, one should say because of this instinct she eloped with Mac. Soon Mac's friend BUCKLE a truck driver, a drunkard approaches her through the gap between the spouses and when she is ready to yield he abuses her and informs Mac that Stacey approached him. Stacey tries to explain which Mac refuses to believe. Stacey in a fit of anger goes to sea shore at midnight where she meets LUKE who is very younger to her, an artist and he calls her 'Mer-woman' which mesmerizes her. She gets into a relationship with Luke and when it comes to the

question of joining him to India she thinks of her children and refuses. Here is where Stacey understands she is not only the wife but also the mother and could not reconcile with the motherhood at any point of time. Soon Mac picks up his business and a sort of relief comes to the family.

Both Maya and Stacey think lots about their flesh and feelings. It is quite natural that younger wives are more conscious about their structure and husband's affection and these two ladies are not exceptions and naturally they gave importance to their own self. They tried to win their husband's affection through some way and they wanted it to happen so naturally and not a bit by transforming themselves. They would have adjusted themselves before taking a strong decision but the 'Individual' took an upper hand over the 'Wife'.

UMA of Desai's 'Fasting Feasting' and MORAG GUNN of Laurence belong to 'short-lived wife' category. Nanda and Hagar lived throughout with their husbands of course without spontaneity of love and affection. Maya and Stacey lead a respectable wife positions though without proper understanding. But Uma and Morag are the pitiable characters who never relished the taste of being authentic wives.

UMA is not a good looking girl. She is myopic and has spectacles and even her complexion is not so fair. She is not fit to be a bride nor is she ready to change herself to attract good grooms. Because of Uma, her younger sister ARUNA, fits to be an exotic bride and is good with all her gracefulness stays unmarried. Uma's parents worry a lot and they fix a merchant as a groom by paying a huge amount as bride price. The groom flies away to America using the bride price. Somehow again they find a second groom and Uma marries him. He takes her to his place in a clumsy, uncomfortable, dirty train journey where he leaves her at his home saying that he has to go to work. For days together he did not come back, meanwhile the in-laws scolded her and her mother for not teaching her to do the household duties properly and neatly, so they taught her to do things so. One fine morning the father comes and says that her husband is already married and has children. Uma returns with her father as the wife of amanbut has not even lived a single day as his wife. Aruna is now married and asks her privately whether 'the man touched her'. MIRA MASI, an older aunt of the household tells Uma that God has chosen you to serve him, only because of that even after paying two bride prices you were not able to lead a life of a wife. The only good thing happened out of Uma's

marriage is her sister's marriage and leads a very happy life in an apartment in Juhu, Bombay with a sea view. Uma never wanted a marriage; she never wanted to be a wife. If people think she is not a suitable bride, Uma is not at all worried. Even after all the disaster, she is not worried because she never lived the life of wife even for a single day and so for her, there is nothing to be worried.

MORAG GUNN of 'The Diviners' by Margaret Laurence is a writer. She loses her parents at very young age, CHRISTIE LOGAN a worker in the Nuisanceground and his wife PRIN take care of her. It was a below-average life and when time comes she marries her tutor DR. BROOKE SKELTON Who is thirty four and always calls Gunn a child because of her tender age. Brooke is so possessive, that he even dictates her with the hairstyle and he wants it done in the way he wanted it to be. The real problem arises when Gunn asked for a child when she is in her thirties, he again repeats 'you yourself are a child'. Gunn meets TONNERRE her childhood friend rather her first love and gets into a relationship with him. Brooke parts Gunn. Gunn says Tonnerre that she would like to have a baby through him and she promises him that he will never ask anything more than that. Gunn gives birth to PICQUE and lives a lonely life. Tonnerre comes back when Picque is in her teens where Picque understands that he is her father. Gunn earns through her writings, she proves herself as a novelist and at any stage she never influenced Tonnerre to marry her or never asked him to live with her. After the birth of Picque, Brooke once visits her with a Dolly lady and the lady is in the same hair style which Brooke wanted her to be in. Gunn, throughout her life never complains about Brooke or Tonnerre. She travels a lot of ups and downs in her life, sometimes she feels lonely and wants someone's shoulder to lean upon, but certainly it is not a husband she wanted. Gunn is highly individualistic and in no minute she completely destroyed 'the wife' in her. Her individuality is well revealed in naming her daughter as 'Picque Gunn Tonnerre' or 'Picque Tonnerre Gunn'

Both Uma and Gunn lived a very short period as wives, though Gunn lived for years together she was not allowed to take up the next role in her life but Uma returns home in days not even understanding what happens in her life. Gunn is so advanced and is very bold and takes decision though Uma is very timid and lives under the care of her parents she is also bold in facing the world. Gunn earns her livelihood and is confident of bringing up a child. Uma dares not even to enter into her sister's household and to look at way she

lives but she never cared to have one household like that for her. Both these characters are 'bold' enough to face the world with the real individuality in them and that took the upper hand of the 'wives' inside them.

Be it Nanda, Hagar, Maya, Stacey, Uma or Gunn have a set up in their biology which dominated the bare social reality. As wives, all these four characters are not satisfied; in fact they are deprived of something which they really wanted and it is different in each case. Nanda was socially respected and she decorated the society with her wifely status but in reality it is not so, but it did not affect her much and now at nineties she neglects the society which neglected her when she was young. Maya was rich and had the social status but was not able to drench herself with the husband's love and affection and so goes to the extent of killing him. It is different with Hagar and Stacey, Bram always loved Hagar but he never tried to change himself so as to abide by the life style of his wife. Even after her departure he made no venture to make her come back to him and that is what really affected Hagar. The proud Presbyterianism in Hagar, the crave for leading a perfect and gentle life, was not quenched and the angel turned stone. For Stacey, it is money and social status made Mac go away from her and that is what caused all the chaos in their life. When things are set right Mac and Stacey reconcile, but it is not the wife in Stacey compromises but it is the mother inside her. In the case of Uma, as per the Hindu culture the younger ones are not allowed to marry when there is an elder child at home, so Uma was found an obstacle at the household. Though her marriage is a failure it was a stepping stone for her sister. Uma wants to live an independent life, choosing a career of her own which is not given to her, but she is not worried. She passively accepts the things which are given to her and this acceptance needs lots of courage and Uma has that. Gunn is very bold, she wants to lead a decent life and tries very hard to build her life towards her interest. So, for all these characters, their 'Individualism' is very important and for which they are always ready to sacrifice 'the Wife' inside them.

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8/1/2013