

BREAKING THE SURFACE IN ANJALI JOSEPH'S *SARASWATI PARK*

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Indian women writers in English are dynamic witnesses to the peculiar socio-cultural, historic, political conflicts faced by humans especially women. Anjali Joseph occupies a unique position in Indian women writers in English. Psychic consequences spread everywhere in her writings. Her intense and suppressed feelings about what it is to be a human being are presented in a realistic picture. They are self-analysis and self-probe into the existential problems. Mostly she dwells on desperation and frustration, misunderstanding and incompatibility, sense of guilt and loss, loneliness, alienation and hostile circumstances around men and women and also the social and cultural oppression.

In *Saraswati Park* Anjali Joseph deals with a variety of silences engulfed by people in a society due to various inward conflicts. She unfolds these psychological conflicts of the complex characters, and their final acceptance of life and their relationships. The characters deal with realities and the truth that lie behind their silence. They suffer silently and the sufferings are portrayed minutely with tears and turmoil and with great insight and sympathetic significance. Finally the inward silences make familial cleave in their relationships resulting to isolation, silence, lacuna, aberration and integration as they journey through their lives. Realisation has helped to break their silence which have not been discussed in the past and have raised the awareness of the people. For instance, in the marital relationship between Lakshmi and Mohan there is nothing seriously wrong outward though the communication between them is either verbal or emotional. Temperamental incompatibility between them accounts for their strange silence. The other main character Mohan's nephew Ashish, is quite happy and satisfied in his mama's house and he continues his studies but still he lacks something inwardly and goes after some mean societal attitudes. When realization of life dawns on them, the characters reconcile with the hard facts of life and maintain their relationships.

Anjali is very particular to write about Bombay where she had grown up, expressing the silences of the people in the society. In an Interview with Alan Wong, Anjali says that "When she began writing her first novel, *Saraswati Park*, she found herself wanting to write about her parents and grandparents' bookish, quiet life" (Bombay Buzz). The protagonist Lakshmi, who despite having played the role of a wife and mother happily and to perfection finds herself lonely and estranged. Her husband Mohan Kareka is a mild man living with his increasingly distant wife. His job is to write letters, the last of a dying profession under a banyan tree in Fort on behalf of the illiterates. His true passion is collecting secondhand books, and he is particularly attached to novels with marginal annotations. They are joined by Mohan's nephew Ashish, a 19-year old boy who is supposed to be studying English Literature but is distracted by his turbulent emotional life.

The lives of each of the three characters are thrown into a sharp relief by the comical frustrations of family life, annoying their friends and relatives with their unspoken yearnings and unheard grievances. Everyone looks happy and dandy but there is a lot brewing underneath which causes quite a bit of tension between the couple and also in the young boy. The inward issues are visible only when their lives start to crumble.

Lakshmi's loneliness has no bounds. She is alone at home and enjoys the humming of a bird while doing the housework. She dresses up to her desire and sits near the window watching out of the

lane. She trusts God because it is the only source for her to revel from her overburden. She “. . . lit a stick of incense in front of the god, and said a prayer. It was a ritual she performed every day, though not because it was supposed to achieve anything; it was a counterpart of her bath, and created a quiet corner in her mind that might, with luck, survive the rest of the day” (56). In the afternoon, she goes to the temple and sees other women who probably feel bored like her. She broods over her life -- how she misses her brother with whom she played games and made fun before her marriage. She hums the same bird song while sitting with them in the temple. She thinks of the characters from the TV Serial and sees them smiling and relaxes at the end of the scenes and the fantasy makes her laugh at herself. She says her prayers in front of each idol and feels slightly foolish by doing so and by the end she is relieved of something inexplicable. She is nearly playful as she comes round the inner shrine. *In Civilization and its Discontents* Freud thinks religion as “so patiently infantile, so foreign to reality” (261). The women in the temple observe fast once in a while but “She’d (Lakshmi) never kept a fast, partly because Mohan hadn’t encouraged it. This was one of the ways in which their marriage was modern; she also called him by his name openly, unlike many women of a previous generation” (64).

Lakshmi’s only consolation at home is watching television serials and pretends herself the characters in the serial. She comes to know what happens in the world through television. She has to hold her breath until Mohan and Ashish have been safely eased into the world for their work. Her whirlwind will be over after teacups and clattering arrivals in the kitchen, departures from the bathroom, reappearances at different stages of readiness, last minute forgetting of things. She feels like a sports coach. She takes care of Ashish as her own son and prepares food for him by knowing his hunger: “Here, eat well. You should, since you have so much studying to do” (45).

The author also pinpoints how a woman accommodates to her situation after her marriage. She belonged to “a family full of loudly talking, cheerful people, into this one, where, often, each person withdrew into silence, nursing his or her own dreams, oblivious to everyone else” (58). Her life in her husband’s house is encloded with silence, nursing his or her dreams. When she slips out in the morning after having done her chores, her in-laws say, “‘Make sure you’re home in time for lunch,’ even when she was going to see her father and her brother” (62). As Myles points out, “Woman has not only faced the opposition of her surroundings and to struggle against many objective obstacles, but she is often divided in herself because she also often subscribes to the Indian idea of womanhood” (130).

The miserable and hopeless lot of Indian women who suffer silently at home and whose voice remains smothered are depicted by the author. Sometimes the message seems traumatic. Lakshmi does not have the nerve of a feminist to question her husband or to free herself from the bondage. She hides a deep sense of futility, frustration and overpowering desolation. All the agonies of her life as an isolated partner make her stand alone and helpless. When one’s basic rights to live a life as he or she loves is at stake, one can expect volcanic eruptions. On the contrary, though deserted, she does not contemplate a divorce as she considers this to be of no use to her. She evolves herself from the utter desolation and bitterness linked up with invisible chains of patriarchal pressure and other family responsibilities by adjustment and accommodation.

Lakshmi gradually breaks the entire surface by creating a new discourse against the chaos of thoughts. As a new independent woman, she does not crumble to pieces at the pain and humiliation inflicted on her. She picks up the threads of her life and tries to readjust her lifestyle to suit the situation. She does not turn against her husband to take revenge upon him for his misdeeds. Also she does not engage herself in gender politics but endures all her sufferings mutely with the hope that life would change and become better.

Lakshmi’s cousin becomes sick and she decides to go to Nagpur the next day but not in real anger. When Mohan speaks to her over phone in Nagpur, she says that her cousin’s condition is poor but is stable and that she plans to stay for sometime there. She feels happy by spending time with the

members of her family. He wishes that Lakshmi would call him to bring her anything she needs in Nagpur. He asks her

‘But do you need anything? I could come, if you need more clothes or anything,’ he’d finally said.

‘No. Why would I? I can borrow whatever I need’ (154).

A lot of questions arise in his mind and he sits down in confusion. After a brief spell of separation, Mohan finally decides to bring Lakshmi back home. Without informing her he goes to Nagpur to bring her back. When they are alone they both open their hearts and confess their feelings. Lakshmi decides to erase the silence between her and Mohan by speaking and listening. This is how she asserts. She realises finally that her emotions and feelings should be shared with others. It is no longer a mute voice, but a voice with hope and promise. *Saraswati Park* is “A beautiful novel that personifies the new India from the inside out” (Ben East).

In the morning Lakshmi is happy. She feels as though she has touched the sky. Her immense joy flows as a child steps into the happy world. She is ready to go with Mohan. A woman’s strength and maturity even in adversity is demonstrated through Lakshmi. She never wants her life to end like that of her brother Satish. She identifies her relation with Mohan in a matured way and recognises that his life always has a different concept and a different identity. In *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande reveals “We struggle to find something with which we can anchor ourselves to this strange world we find ourselves in. Only when we love do we find this anchor” (137). Joseph too is of the view that all frustrations, failures and disappointments in life could be set right only when we love others as we love ourselves, as Jesus said. She opines that one should not retaliate and take revenge on others whatever be the nature of the tangles created, and also not to feel tired, feel lonely, or desperate, whatever be the issue.

Like Lakshmi, Mohan too leads a very dandy and satisfied life before the world with much limited verbal communication but he lacks inward happiness. At the time of their early marriage days he used to go with Lakshmi to various tourist spots, to her parent’s house and to her cousin in Pune. He used to wake early in the morning for his walk while his wife still sleeps. He makes tea for both and “He strained the tea into two cups and covered one, which he took into the bathroom and left on the table next to his wife’s head; he opened his mouth to say “Tea” (4). Very slowly he opens the cupboard to take his shirt fearing that Lakshmi would wake up and if he finds her waking up, he points out “But I didn’t wake you” (5). When Lakshmi broods over the thought of her sibling’s death, Mohan tries to cheer her up in his own way: He feels worried: “. . . for a variety of reasons: one was that she was so obviously unhappy; another was that she had become sentimental about her brother in a way that was unbounded, impossible to reason with” (136). He proudly introduces his nephew Ashish to his colleagues when he comes to his office to get the house key.

Unfortunately, Mohan pays more attention to books than to his wife who is a lovable Indian mother, behaves entirely like a middleclass formal wife hiding her feelings. Wollstonecraft explores gender inequality as the unequal nature of gender relations is caused because of lack of education and that which keeps the women in a secondary position. His thirst for personal ambitions puts her in solitude. He does not think about Lakshmi’s interests. Once he comes home early and his wife asks:

‘I thought it was you! You’re not well?’

‘Don’t attack me right at the door,’ he said wearily. He came in, and closed the outer door with a soft click.

‘Another book,’ she said

He walked past her and deposited the books on one of the jars that covered the old table in the living room. (12)

He feels for the boy who brings tea for him from Sainath Tea House and the lady who wears green sari of about thirty years but he has no feeling and deep concern for his wife. Simone de Beauvoir

argues “men are able to mystify women” (53) and this mystification and stereotyping are instrumental in creating patriarchy.

Lakshmi uses this as an opportunity and goes to her hometown Nagpur to see her cousin, leaving Mohan to ponder over his deeds. The flat is quiet when Lakshmi is in Nagpur. He feels very lonely to see that there is no one at home. Loneliness is “a thing he didn’t want to think about” (154).

He could not justify his wife.

Mohan found himself looking at his wife’s chair, in front of the silent television. It was five days since she’d left for Nagpur; she’d forgotten to take her shawl. . . . But she liked to wrap herself in it on cooler monsoon nights. . . .

He got up now, opened the shawl, shook it out and folded it neatly, then hung it again over the back of the chair. (150-51)

He feels odd, “like a stranger in the house” (173) in her absence.

He walked around the room now, trying to remember what life had been like before he’d married. The period was vague, . . . Had there arisen, in the interval between their wedding and now, demands that he hadn’t been able to fulfill? Had she changed? Was he supposed to have changed? Had it been, he wondered darkly, the television? Had their life failed to provide the kind of excitement that she might have enjoyed? He saw her calm face in his mind, and frowned. . . . So would it be like this, one of those arrangements where two people live largely apart but continue to be married in name? (175-76).

Realisation in life comes to him. With the insistence of his wife, he arranges a maid to do the cleaning and cooking at home. It is expensive for him to have maid at home but they could manage from the money Megha sends home every month. “It occurred to him only now that they should have done this earlier; then Lakshmi would have had more time to herself” (154). Mohan realizes that the arrival of Ashish has given more work for Lakshmi. He thinks “had it been something Mohan had forced on her?” (173).

He goes to Nagpur to take her back but he could not read Lakshmi’s expressions. When they go to sleep in a room, he sat near her and put a hand on her. She said,

‘I was very angry with you.’

He stared ahead of him, then squinted at her. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said stiffly.

‘I know’ she said. She smiled suddenly, at the strangeness of this conversation, then glanced down at her comb, where a few erratically curly white strands were tangled. (234)

She also confesses that her brother Satish always says “‘I don’t have to worry about you, Mohan will be there to look after you and the children,’ and for him that was good enough” (236). They pour their hearts to each other and then she decides to go with her husband.

Ashish comes to his uncle’s house because of his parents’ transfer to another place and he cannot take his exams this year. He enjoys complete freedom and leads a satisfied life in his uncle’s house. When he steps into the house, his aunt Lakshmi stands at the doorstep to do some ceremonial. Lakshmi takes care of him as her own son and he too is fond of her than his mother. They both go to market to buy things. He encourages his uncle to write some short stories for magazines as he has the interest of writing and that which makes Mohan to have even less time for Lakshmi. He invites his friend home for lunch and cooks food using the recipe given by Mohan’s friend Mr.Sodawaterbottlewala. He feels very sorry for his aunt who has lost her brother and tries to make her feel better. He talks to her nicely and starts conversation with her about her favourite television programmes. His mama often takes him for walks and introduces people in the neighbourhood and always motivates him to study well.

Though he feels satisfied at home something he lacks inwardly. He goes in search of something. He develops illegal affairs with males and all these people who showered on him the love and affection forsake him and he finally comes to a realization. In the beginning he and his friend Sunder make it as a routine after classes ended to go to Sunder's house by taxi to do "the thing." Sunder being a very rich boy pays for the taxi and the coffee bill. Finally, one day their doing is seen by Sunder's servant who brings a tray with glasses of juice and a plate of cake. From then onwards their deed has come to an end because Sunder feels that he has responsibilities to his family and to the business. Sunder is very stubborn and he insisted on Ashish's exit from his house. While Ashish leaves his house, he looks back hoping that Sunder would call him back but nothing happens. Thus he is thrown out as a curry leaf by Sunder.

Ashish turns his attention to his studies. In the meantime his uncle arranges tuition for Ashish with a teacher Mr. Narayan who is also a homosexual. He develops an affair with the teacher. They study for sometime and continue "the doing." One day as usual, when Narayan hands over his clothes to Ashish, he suspects that Narayan will be happy enough if he leaves. Accordingly he insists on him to leave the house. As soon as his foot hits the first of the stairs Ashish hears the door clicks behind him. Ashish feels very hurt that he is neglected by the teacher also. Their relationship also comes to a close. When Ashish says that he is going to meet some of his friends of his own age, the suggestion is welcomed by Narayan. Narayan after using Ashish, advises him to give importance to his studies as he is young. Having a last look at Narayan he leaves the house. Ashish has a relationship with his cousin Gautam too and he decides that "he and Gautam would one day realize they were meant for each other and live together in a state of quasi-erotic, quasi-romantic happiness" (207).

After all these wanderings and thrown-offs, Ashish becomes normal. He realises how untidy his room is. He arranges his bookshelf and his room and finds the timetable which he has prepared in the beginning of the year to study. After many months, he starts to observe the owls which come to his window sill at night. Now he is back in his own world or in Saraswati Park at any rate.

The room reminded him of his defeats, and the disappointments of the years: the damp marks on the walls, the stains and specks of black on the yellowing paint spoke of lives lived imperfectly. He went to the cupboard and examined himself in the rusty mirror on the door, under the miniature but brave image of Viv Richards and his on-drive. Ashish's eyes had something new about them – maybe recent events had taken the obstinate shine from him. (221)

The paper analyses the very predicament of human existence. The uneasiness of the society expects people to be an embodiment of sacrifice, a monument of devotion and a selfless bestowal of love and affection. It is to be pointed out that this paper consists of a move towards self-knowledge. Doubt and anxiety push the characters to intense self-examination. Self-pity is not the answer to the problems of life but it is a process of self-examination that one can change one's situation from despair to hope. They live silently with all their depressions and oppressions. The novelist underscores how to break the surface without breaking the close relationships which can soothe the hard realities of life. Knowing their family situations they try their best to conform to their roles and the novel ends with an optimistic note with the possibility of some positive action in future.

The paper also depicts lack of mutual communication, love, adjustment or understanding between man and woman. The characters' inner lives with the transient beauty of every day life are revealed. Their search for survival is a legitimate one. Though they run through traumatic situations, they cannot come out of their relationships. With all the limitations and sorrows, life has to go on. Love, with its cruelty and selflessness, binds together the conflicting multiple sameness of one's self. It helps one to continue with life, the greatest gift of mankind. With a new understanding of life and relationship, Lakshmi realises that life is worth living as there are flashes of love, concern, understanding and reconciliation that brighten it. Mohan feels for the break and the resultant

loneliness and readjusts himself by pouring his heart to his wife. Ashish after many wanderings, realises that nothing will give peace and happiness unless one knows to lead a life worthy. They think about home and finally accommodate themselves in their own houses. Their predicament is not where they are but who they are. Home is often just a remembered sense of childhood, embroidered by memory.

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