

Exploring Gender Roles and Societal Expectations in 'The Domestic Maid'

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Abstract

Anita Desai's 'The Domestic Maid,' a short story, criticizes the patriarchal system that restricts the speech, behaviour and action of women. The story explores the intersections between gender roles, societal expectations and class structures in traditional Indian society. The present research paper analyses the story from the feminist perspective to point out how the women are marginalized and the work allotted to them is not based on quality but on gender. It also deals with the psychological toll of societal expectations on women. Through the central character of the story, it is explored how the women are marginalized on the basis of their gender and class. The working class women are double marginalized. The present research paper focus on the criticism of Anita Desai of gender roles and the need to foster greater gender equity.

Keywords: Anita Desai, women, gender roles, societal expectations, marginalization

Anita Desai is well-known for the portrayal of women and their lives in Indian society. Her works deal with the emotional or psychological struggle faced by women and their fight against the societal expectations. 'The Domestic Maid' is a short story that deals with the complexities of gender roles and class dynamics in a domestic setting. It throws light on the oppression experienced in general and working class women in particular.

The traditional Indian society has limited the world of women to the home or kitchen. Her responsibilities are to care, to serve and to sacrifice. Due to patriarchal social structure, women often find themselves marginalized. The situation worsens more when she is a woman from working class or socio-economically backward class. The thoughts of Geeta focus on problems of working class women.

.....“these rich people have no compassion for poor women like us. Don't they ever realize that life is a daily struggle for us? They have all the facilities in this beautiful house, bathroom, running water, kitchen stuffed with at least two months of rations and snacks. But we do not have even the basic necessities to lead a dignified life. Even small delays make them shout and curse us like hell. Who should I complain to?”

The present paper criticizes the construction of gender and class in society through the portrayal of a domestic maid who stands for the systemic oppression of women in general and working class in particular. The study seeks to find out how the lives of women are controlled by their male counterparts and are left powerless. 'The Domestic Maid' criticizes the patriarchal and

classist structures of society on one hand, and expresses the need to reevaluate the gender norms and societal expectations that perpetuate the marginalization of women. In this regard it would be worthwhile to quote what Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* writes has said: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman." (Beauvoir,17, 2011)

The depictions of gender roles and the societal expectations placed upon women is a recurring theme in Indian literature. The role of women is restricted within the domestic space is the theme of the story 'The Domestic Maid'. Anita Desai is competent to portray the psychological and emotional world of women.

Kimberle Edenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' that emphasize how gender, class and race contribute to systems of oppression and discrimination. The central character in the story undergoes the dual oppression and is marginalized because of her gender and her socio-economic status as well. The scholars and critics have studied Anita Desai's novels intensively; but her stories are not much discussed in general and 'The Domestic Maid' in particular. The studies done so far ignore the intersectional dimensions of gender and class in this story and thereby a gap in feminist literary scholarship is found. So, the present a research paper address the gap by providing a focused analysis of 'The Domestic Maid' to criticize the societal expectations and the dehumanization of women within domestic spaces.

The central character, Geeta, in 'The Domestic Maid' represents the intersection of gender and class oppression. She is described by the writer thus: 'Among the group is a

frail, medium built, dark complexioned woman, trailing behind with her head bent, looking forlorn and creases of deep worry scaling her small forehead.' Her identity is reduced to a servant for she is a working class woman. The story highlights the social dehumanization of women engaged in domestic labour. Her struggles discover the invisibility of women who occupy the space in the periphery of domestic and public spheres. The treatment given to the maid-servant shows the systemic nature of her subjugation. Her value is judged by her usefulness to others.

The story portrays the patriarchal power politics which results in the relationship among the members in the house. In the patriarchal system the male characters are depicted as the beneficiaries of the labour and the women are often supposed to do sacrifices. The mistress of the house is secondary to the owner of the house. But she has some special privileges when she is dealing with the servant of the house. The change in power structure reflect that patriarchy is not only related to the gendered system but to the social class and economic dependency also. Chhaaya, the friend of Geeta, explains to her:

"See, they are also women and have to live under their husband, in-laws. If they are working, then there is the frustration at office as well. Because they cannot take out this anger and frustration on anyone else, they take it out on us. That's all."

'The Domestic Maid' criticizes the gendered division of labour which restricts women to domestic roles. The work done by the maid such as cleaning, cooking and caring for the household is necessary but it is

undervalued which reflects the invisibility of women's contribution in patriarchal society. It is expected from women that they should think of the needs of others by ignoring their aspirations which leads to the erasure of their personal identity. Through mail servant, Anita Desai focus on the exploitation based on the class structure.

The maid's sense of duty and acceptance of her role reflect the pervasive impact of cultural conditioning. However, the moments of rebellion or quiet resilience in her character hints that there is a potential for agency even within the oppressive systems. When her friend asks her as to why she was beaten the previous night, she explains:

-----"he wanted me to borrow money from Asha *didi* so he can buy a cycle. He finds it difficult to walk two kilometers to the factory every day. I refused, I have already borrowed from three different houses. After the monthly deductions there is hardly any money left for our home. When I refused to borrow anymore, he punished me."

Anita Desai's 'The Domestic Maid' criticizes the societal norms that continue oppression based on gender and class. Through the character of the domestic maid, Desai focuses on the systemic marginalization of women from economically deprived class by threatening of chuck out of job.

"Now don't be late tomorrow or I will chuck you out. There are a hundred women out there waiting to work at my place."

The use of harsh language is common for working class women.

"Why don't you answer, why are you late? Too much money and food has gone into your stomach, that's why you people take advantage of good people like us,"..... "Don't tell lies. Every day you people have the same excuse," Asha interrupts, rudely.

The story vividly portrays how societal expectations restrict women to the traditional roles and deny them agency and individuality. The only difference between the mistress and the maid-servant is:

"The only difference between their lives and ours is that their husbands don't beat them black and blue; for us that is the eternal truth, day in and day out."

The story is relevant because it addresses the contemporary issues surrounding gender equality and labour rights. It insists a reevaluation of the societal norms that undervalue domestic work and prolong the invisibility of women's contributions.

In conclusion, 'The Domestic Maid' criticizes existing inequalities on one hand and gives a call for systemic change. Anita Desai's work highlights the importance of identifying and addressing the multidimensional nature of subjugation. She advocates a society which values inclusivity, equality and the self-respect of all individuals irrespective of their gender or social status.

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