Liberty and Freedom: Treatment in the Novels

Literally freedom and liberty appear synonymous to each other but in Desai’s novels they are different from each other. Freedom is granted, while liberty is taken. Freedom is not absolute, it is granted with limitations while liberty is at one’s own will.

Freedom is the ability to act without restraints. It happens on collective level. Concept of freedom depends on rules. One needs not to struggle to gain freedom. From the philosophical point of view freedom means unwillingness to subjugate, lacking submission. It is an ability to act in accordance with universal value.

Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women. It happens on individual level. Liberty is acquired through the joining of like-minded individuals to gain special privileges for themselves. Concept of liberty presupposes the idea of struggle.

In order to fully understand the concept of liberty in the novels of Anita Desai we have to keep in consideration the importance of freedom. While attempting to explain the recurrence
of liberty one cannot ignore the importance of freedom in the novels of Desai.

In Anita Desai writing, freedom works as supportive agent in attaining liberty. The characters in her novels try to secure liberty with the aid of freedom, which has already been granted to them by their family members willingly in a limited way.

Desai’s debut novel **Cry the Peacock** is a maiden novel, and it depicts neurotic Maya’s quest for personal liberty. M.H. Williams has rightly said that, “Cry the Peacock is a disturbing novel, mostly takes the form of interior monologue, delineating the tragic mental breakdown of a young Indian woman, Maya”. (Williams 87) Maya seeks liberty from loneliness, fear of death, reality and imprisonment, which she feels in her husband’s house.

Being married to an over busy husband Maya feels lonely in Gautama’s house. Throughout the narrative she longs for liberty from the sense of loneliness. Maya led an over protected life during her childhood. She could see nothing beyond her father that’s why she feels uneasy when she is burdened with responsibilities. Maya
lived in the world of fantasy during her adolescent days. She seeks liberty from reality with which she is confronted after her marriage to Gautama, who is a realist. She is granted freedom of acting and thinking by her husband but it does provide no aid in attaining these psychic liberties for psychic liberty is based on one’s own will. In order to attain psychic liberty one needs no supporting agent.

Maya also strives to get liberty from fear of death. Freedom plays considerable role in helping Maya to attain this liberty. Endowed with the freedom of thinking Maya thinks that the only way to attain liberty from fear of death is the act of killing her husband Gautama for albino astrologer had predicted that either she or her husband would die during the fourth year of their marriage. She thinks that by shifting the burden of prophecy to her husband she will secure liberty. Maya assert liberty from fear of death by pushing her husband to certain death.

Throughout the novel Maya seeks ‘Release and liberty’. (158) She feels herself ‘trapped in an oneiric ball’. (75) She longs for liberty from imprisonment and marital bondage in which she is
entangled due to her marriage to Gautama. She identifies herself with caged birds, monkeys and bears. In order to attain liberty, she takes support of freedom of acting. Acting freely she kills her husband and assert liberty from all bondages.

Desai’s second novel *Voices in the City* presents an account of the despair, which entraps the highly sensitive siblings Nirode, Monisha and Amla. H. M. Williams has rightly said. “It is an existential novel that explores the inner climate of youthful despair”. (Williams 91) Novel depicts Nirode’s quest for liberty from city life and routine.

In order to get liberty from city life and routine, Nirode takes help of freedom because for a male it’s easy to break away from routine. Being a male, he is free to move anywhere he wants to. To assure liberty from city life and routine he freely withdraws from the outside world and starts living in the dirty locality of Calcutta. Acting freely, Nirode rejects his past, the wealth of his family and everything that may tie him with routine. Endowed with the freedom of thinking he frees himself from all wishes, ambitions and
emotional ties. Freedom plays significant role in Nirode’s quest for liberty from city life and routine.

Nirode is also in quest for existential liberty. Freedom plays vital role in Nirode’s existential quest. Being a male he possess freedom of choice. With the help of this help of this freedom of choice, he develops his own value system rebilling against all forms of authority and establishments. In order to achieve existential liberty he starts living in “Shadow, silence and stillness”. (10)

He gives up his job and starts editing a literary magazine of his own. His freedom of will is shown in his shifting from one project to another. Nirode freely delinks himself from his family name to get an independent identity. Acting freely he puts up with poverty and starts living in a room, which is even unsuited for pigeons, but he declines other’s help. Thus in Nirode’s case importance of freedom in the quest for liberty cannot be ignored.

Like her brother Nirode, Monisha also seeks liberty from routine. She wants to go away from her husband’s house for she feels trapped in it. She also desires liberty from marital bondage for
nothing is similar between Monisha and her husband. Being a female, she finds it difficult to liberate herself of her duties. Monisha is granted freedom in a limited way for she is a female and married in a traditional Hindu family. To secure liberty from social milieu she retreats behind the “barred windows” (149), which instead of helping her in attaining liberty makes her plight worse. Though Monisha is given limited freedom but she has freedom of thinking. In her struggle for liberation from social milieu, marital bondage and captivity in husband’s house, death seems to be the only way out. Endowed with the freedom of thinking, Monisha thinks that the only way to attain liberty is the act of committing suicide. Like a free soul she hurries out of her room, which is filled with sounds of outer people and commits suicide. Her faithful quest for liberty led her to her death. N.R. Gopal rightly points out “The life of a woman like in the given circumstances is never happy and the result is that she burns herself to death”. (Gopal 25)

Thus freedom plays no considerably role in Monisha’s quest for liberty for she possesses limited freedom because of being a
female.

**Where Shall We Go This Summer?** portrays psychology of a middle-aged woman, who tries to say “No” to her life in her husband’s house. The lines, which firmly possess her mind, are:

> To certain people there comes a day when they must say the great “Yes” of the great “No”.(136)

Sita is in quest for liberty from city life and its violence and destruction. She also desires to get liberty from social milieu, marital bondage and discontented life of womanhood. She is the daughter of a freedom fighter. After her father’s death, she marries to Raman but she finds it impossible to continue a ‘sluggish life’ in her husband’s house. She is granted freedom of thinking, acting and freedom of will by her businessman husband. She can do whatever she wants to do. In order to attain desired liberties, Sita plans to go to Manori Island and her husband does not stop her. She goes to island with her two children Menka and Karan. But on her arrival to Manori, she finds it disappointing. She feels as much an outsider here as she was in Bombay. With the arrival of her husband Sita
thinks, that she will not attain her desired liberties. But her husband Raman instead of imposing himself upon her releases her. “At last she was free to live life in her own style”. (149) The novel ends with the departure of Sita from the island to lead a life, which she always felt aimless. She comes to an understanding that “Life must be continued”. (138). She accepts the grim truth that she has to face the assaults of existence all alone.

**Fire on the Mountain**, published in 1977 in London, placed Anita Desai’s reputation as one of the best Indian English novelists. The protagonist, Nanda Kaul is wife of an ex Vice-Chancellor of Punjab University.

The novel depicts the frustration and agony experienced by Nanda Kaul in her quest for liberty from social, familial and marital bondages. Nanda Kaul, a great grandmother lives in Carignano to attain liberty from social and familial norms. Throughout her life, she sought liberty from her social & familial duties but she did not attain it for she was not granted freedom by her husband. All her life she yielded to the requirements of her husband’s status and to
her wishes. Till her husband’s death, she led her life according to his dictates not because of love but out of sense of duty. This great grandmother had no freedom of thinking, acting and freedom of will as a Vice Chancellor’s wife. Her husband had an extra marital affair with Miss Davidson but she could do nothing for being a female she was incapable to stop her husband due to the lack ness of freedom. She feels relieved after her husband’s death because now she was free to live life according to her wishes and desires. She attained liberty from marital and social bondages. Now she wanted liberty from the maddening crowd of children and grand children i.e. familial bondages.

After her husband’s death Nanda got freedom, which was beyond her imagination till her husband’s death because the dictator at whose command she used to dance is now dead. She is free to do whatever she wants to do. Now she easily liberates herself from familial duties by retiring to Carignano. But even in Carignano her sense of liberty is threatened by the arrival of her great granddaughter Raka. Once again the noose of familial duties slip
around her neck. She groans, “Discharge me. I’ve discharged all my duties. Discharge”. (30) Throughout her life Nanda desired to attain liberty but she could not get it for she had no freedom with the help of which she could have attained it. She could not even die liberally for she thinks herself responsible for Ila Das’ rape and murder. She dies with the sense of guilt.

For the first time in the fictional world of Anita Desai, the reader experiences a complete family atmosphere in Fasting, Feasting. In almost all her earlier novels, the protagonist had to suffer the limitations caused by only single parent. But in this novel, the very influential presence of both the parent MamaPapa makes a complete whole. Uma, the protagonist of the novel is in quest for liberty from household boundary and discontented life of womanhood.

Born and brought up in a traditional Indian family, Uma is neither granted freedom of thinking, nor freedom of acting, nor freedom of choice because of being a female. After her failure in exams she wanted to continue her studies but her Mama did not
grant her freedom of choice. Her pleading to continue her schooling went in vain. She is not even given freedom to cross boundaries of her house without the permission of her parents. Twice, she tries to liberate herself from her discounted life by drowning herself but she is brought back on the bank of life.

Uma is not even granted freedom to make a phone call. An opportunity to attain liberty comes in the form of job offered by Dr. Dutt. She sees liberty from household boundary in the form of career but she is not even asked once. Endowed with no freedom of acting, she could do nothing. The offer is turned down by Papa. She is denied every thing in her life for being a female. She does not granted freedom because of which she could not attain liberty.

Uma’s brother Arun is also in quest for liberty from filial bondages in which he is caught because of being born in a traditional family in which boys are supposed superior to girls. In his childhood, he was not granted freedom of choice. He was dancing to the tunes of Papa. Having no freedom of choice he was forced to eat meat, he did not like. He was heaped with so much
attention that he felt suppressed. He was sent to America without being asked. In America he enjoys freedom. Now he is free to act according to his own instinct. In America “he had at last experienced total freedom”. (172)

Soon Arun’s sense of freedom is threatened by his father, who in a letter asks him to stay with Pattons during his summer vacation. He groans, “Had they still not stopped discussing him”. (175) After a brief stay with Pattons, Arun relieves him of invisible bondage by giving Mrs. Pattons the packet of tea and Kashmiri shawl sent by his parents. Ultimately Arun secures desired liberty.
Works Cited


---. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*. New Delhi: Orient Paperback, 2001.


