

## Portrayal of the Patriarchal Myths and Gender Sensitization in Anjana Appachana's "Bahu"

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Anjana Appachana is a famous Indian-American award winning short story writer and novelist. She has a lot of feelings for India which can be evident in her writings. Appachana acquired a new specific voice among Indian English Diasporic women writers after writing her first volume of short fiction Incantations and Other Stories (1991). She has chosen the medium of short story for expressing the inconsistency of women's psyche. She has also written about the common Indian woman's experience, unfulfilled dreams and passions in her major novel Listening Now (1998). By depicting conservative mind-set and double standard of Indian patriarchal society, Appachana emphasizes on the education and emancipation of women. Through her stories Anjana presents sensitive issues of gender along with diasporic sensibility. She portrays loneliness, marginalization and dislocation of her female characters even in their own 'home'. Anjana especially focuses on the lives of women without being prejudiced about feminism. The story "Bahu" is from her first story collection Incantation and Other Stories (1991) which is set in Indian society and the female protagonist of the story portrays her quest for self-knowledge and self-realization in the relationship of marriage.*

*The present paper is an attempt to draw attention to the domination, subjugation and marginalization of the woman character in a male dominated patriarchal society and also provides her a new meaning of life in the midst of her psychological struggle and social integrity towards her freedom.*

**Key Words:** *inconsistency, conservative mind-set, double standard, patriarchal, emancipation, diasporic sensibility, loneliness, marginalization, dislocation, prejudiced, feminism, self-realization.*

### **Introduction:**

Anjana Appachana is a renowned Indian diasporic woman writer who gained popularity in the field of fiction after writing her short story collection *Incantations and Other Stories* (1991) and foremost novel *Listening Now* (1998). She presents the strong conventions of Indian society through her characters in her stories. She provides full freedom to her readers so that they could judge the situations and think on their own. In this way the readers form their own opinion and become active participants in her stories. But on the other time they sometimes feel themselves distant and exotic. The characters of her stories follow the rules and regulations fearlessly with all their failures and triumphs. By highlighting an empathetic attitude for solving the societal problems, Anjana threatens the value system of the tradition. Most of her stories have one point in common that it all present female predicament to the readers but by no means ruled by the author's feminism. Besides, the presentation of her subject matter is unique but at the same time it is memorable, distant, striking, excellent, and recognizable.

The present story "bahu" depicts the life of a daughter-in-law in a fragile family system in India. Anjana does not give any name to her character as she is always considered as secondary in her home. She has no value and respect in a male dominated patriarchal family. No one pays attention on her interest and state of mind as she is not an entity. Anjana wants to show the distressing condition of women in the relationship of marriage through the character of 'bahu'. She describes the experiences of a newlywed girl who doesn't feel any affection in the home of her husband and her in-laws. This story is written from the point of view of a daughter-in-law who describes about her traumatic life and ambiance of her in-

laws' family and house. She feels that her life would be different but soon she realizes that it was only her fault. In the story the 'bahu' has to face a lot of adversities in dealing with the responsibilities of her married life.

### **Discussion:**

"Bahu" is the story about the love marriage of Siddharth and the protagonist in an Indian joint family. The daughter-in-law narrates the whole story from her viewpoint. She feels disheartened when she and her husband did not get any time for each-other and if they get the time accidentally for movie, her in-laws family also go with them. She remembers that it has passed a year when she went alone with her husband. Every time they accompany with them without considering the feelings of a newly wedded girl. This reflects the orthodox mindset of traditional society who feels pleasure at the suffering of their daughter-in-law. Due to the household responsibilities she feels entangled between her past life and present life. In developing her self-recognition she has to face isolation and separation even at her own in-laws house. By introducing a movie in the story Anjana wants to reveal homesickness, immigration, displacement, gender discrimination and callousness of the patriarchal structure of the society which always prefer a baby boy in place of a girl.

The narrator feels agitated sometimes as there is no one in the family with whom she can share her feelings and sufferings. Even her husband Siddhartha also doesn't have time for her because of his busy schedule. For this very reason she suffers from nostalgia for her parents' home and misses their unconditional love at present. She remembers, "just a fifteen hour journey away by train...It seemed an eternity since I had talked to anyone, or anyone had talked to me, I felt so overwhelmingly homesick" (Appachana 13). She does not get time to meet her parents because her in-laws' servant has absconded and she is the only person who has to manage the house. This exposes the narrow mindedness and hegemony of the society which considers that it is only the duty of a woman to manage the house, particularly after

marriage. The protagonist also comes across the humiliation out of the house at the cinema hall when a middle aged man teases her intentionally. She has faced this type of situation many times yet by his incompatibility she becomes so much scared. This shows that women are still treated as commodity and they are not safe in the society even though they are married or unmarried. She comments, “What a sick city this is. There is so much cruelty and frustration under its veneer of sophistication” (Appachana 14) which shows that there is much hatred, meanness and nuisance under the face of goodness and sophisticated society.

There is a perpetual struggle in the mind of the speaker between her past and present time. She does not get any support and strength from her in laws so she feels uncomfortable in their house. Her mother-in-law always talks to her negatively that she is unable to do her duty and she always lives out of the home because of her job. She realizes her mother-in-law’s hatred and taunts towards her each and every time. The bahu replies at her conventional thinking that even though she has to go to job still she did all the works in the house. But she becomes much upset as she has no right to speak against her in-laws and she has to suffer all these things only because she is a female. The speech of her mother-in-law focuses on gender prejudice and inequality in the society:

You have no concern for our feelings, you do exactly what you want. How many bahus wear trousers in front of their in-laws? On the contrary they cover their heads in front of their elders. We have not stopped you from working. You spend your salary the way you wish. Other working bahus give their entire salaries to their mothers-in-law. Have we ever forbidden you to go to your parents for one month at a stretch? We even allow you to call our son by his name in our presence. All this is because we are liberal enlightened. We have allowed you all these concessions. And yet you go around with a long face giving people the impression that we are beating you, ill-treating you. (Appachana 15)

The protagonist becomes very much frustrated and isolated at the loss of refuge, estrangement and identity. She remembers that every time she has to accept it “that the adjustment is necessary to marriage. There’s no point upsetting people when you’re living with them” (Appachana 16).

She experiences a different world after her marriage, even her husband Siddharth has also changed while he was her friend and lover before marriage. At last she says to herself that she would discard the relationship of the marriage as well as her husband, yet it is not possible for her to do because she has thought about it many times. She does not like to be her mother as she and her sister had to see her mother’s tolerance and disappointments throughout her life. Her father never considered her mother as a human being other than a good wife and mother but he supported his three daughters very much. That is why she always expects support from Siddharth in fulfilling her dreams. She remembers the time of their marriage when her parents have to gratify the needs of Siddharth’s parents as well as family members. She wanted to stop all this but her parents said, “This is between the parents, they said. You and Siddharth keep out of it. Besides, they added, his parents have not demanded any cash. Then why give all this? I asked. My mother replied they expect it” (Appachana 18). Siddharth also suggests her to keep out of this matter as it is natural concept of the society that in a girl’s family no one can take gift from a boy’s family.

No one in the story considers her feelings even Siddharth, yet she performs good role of a traditional bahu, as- work in the morning, evening and make tea and dinner for the family members, upcoming guests and relatives. Just because of this she even didn’t get the time for her parents, friends and relatives. Her mother-in-law always comments her even on the petty things and her husband Siddharth never refutes against it. She even sacrifices her longing for music and her rarest outings with her husband because she didn’t want to face the displeasure of her after their return. She doesn’t feel that her daughter-in-law is also

someone's daughter while she was very much attached with her own daughter and her grandson. Moreover, her in-laws family and relatives talk about a good and healthy society for women but they are not concerned about her own daughter-in-law as if she has no life or feelings in her. Even after her pregnancy the protagonist doesn't feel any happiness due to the attitude of her family members and she also doesn't want to perform her role as a good 'bahu' twenty four hours a day. She feels entangled between her career and her feelings of motherhood as she doesn't want to leave her job, while her in-laws were very happy and they started to predict that it would be a boy who will resemble like Siddharth.

Instead of being sympathetic towards his wife Siddharth always takes favour of his mother and says that it was not possible for his mother to change herself according to the modern society so she will have to adjust according to his mother. He concluded that his mother is old-fashioned and follows the traditions and customs of the society so she needs not to think bad for her. At that night due to the tension and anxiety the bahu has miscarried and the child died. The family took her to the hospital and the doctors suggested her for complete bed rest. Even in this situation her husband Siddharth blamed her for everything and because of the warnings of her mother-in-law, she also started to do household works and went back to her work. At that night she assumed that after marriage everything has changed in her life and she feels confusion and estrangement in adapting new people and relations. But it was not her fault as she knew only Siddharth in this new family who must have given her security and emotional support her, however, it doesn't happen, "And Siddharth. What about Siddharth? I must accept it, mustn't I? That he let it be. He chose to let it be. He saw. How could he help but see, he was not blind. Yes, he chose to let it be" (Appchana 25). She does not feel any difference between her husband and his all family members. The protagonist's imaginative speech to her husband emphasizes on the dejected and displaced position of all the women in a patriarchal society:

He could have stopped it, protected me. Only he could do that. I needed protection. I needed him.... He just had to say to them, she's tired, let her rest.... He could have said, I'll help you with the work and so will my mother and sister. Instead he said, you never smile. He could have said, I need more time with my wife. Instead he said, there's no need to be so resentful when people come to our room, you mustn't be so selfish. He could even have said, I don't know what we would have done without you. But he said, you look a wreck. But mostly he said nothing. (Appachana 25-26)

She thinks about the changed behaviour of her husband and considers him as a stranger about whom she does not know anything. She compares herself to others and nostalgically remembers her past days at her home before marriage. Everything was like heaven for her before marriage because she was independent to do anything according to her own. She was very much happy in her little world with her parents before marriage but at present she was very much confused at her married relationship in which there is no freedom for her. She disappointedly remembers that she could be unhappy but she was not alone:

For me, life went on as usual, and if sometimes, I wondered, will it ever happen to me, I also felt that if it didn't, maybe it did not matter. I had an excellent job, I had my music, I was dependent on no one. Most importantly, I had people who loved me, who in times of stress, were always there. I recall times when I was unhappy, but never alone. (Appachana 28)

She realizes that in her present life there is no one with her to whom she could talk to; even she only gets time for herself during the bus journey to office and home. She sits like statue without any feeling but feels much comfortable in the bus in comparison to her home while in her previous days she was happy and used to dream her future. But she couldn't do anything and her life cannot be changed as Siddharth has taken it for granted. She talks to herself:

I could not change it. I could not change the way they thought. Did they really think this way, or was it just more convenient for them to do so?

I could not change it. Especially since Siddharth accepted it. Did I then also accept it? Could I? How could I go backwards? Acceptance would mean that I would live this way, always. It would never mean that I could accept it as the right thing to do. How then could I do it, day after day, year after year? For whom? And why?... It cannot go on like this. I have no privacy at all, no independence. It is not my house. We have no time together... And would I also say, no one really cares for me, not even you Siddharth. (Appachana 29-30)

After thinking all this during the night she is in dilemma for taking up the right decision as it is very difficult for a divorced woman to survive alone even in this modern age in India. Although it is the fault of a man the society only blame woman for everything as it was conditioned from a long period in the mindset of the people.

At last she recognizes that she has no position of her own and there is no privacy or freedom for her in the home of her in-laws. So she finally decides to leave her husband Siddharth and his family, "What would it be to stay on my own? Just me and my room, my books, my music, my friends? Some men would think I was easy game. What would they say at work? We always thought she was such a nice girl. One wouldn't have expected this of her" (Appachana 31). This shows the psychological pain of a wife as she recognizes the fact that her husband is very much concerned only about his parents, society and himself except for her. When Siddharth comes to know about it, he tries to make her understand helplessly to change her decision as leaving everything is not the solution of any problem. It is ironical here that he is telling to his wife about her responsibilities while he renounces his responsibility of looking after his wife and being kind-hearted with her. But now she refuses everything and leaves the house in the hope to start her new life with her own identity. In the end Siddharth says to her that he will wait for her arrival but she walks out of the house as an enlightened lady.

**Research Methodology:**

The research methodology which is employed for achieving the objectives of the research paper is as follows:

- 1 The essential information is achieved from primary source i.e. selected short story “Bahu” from Anjana Appachana’s *Incantations and Other Stories*.
- 2 Descriptive qualitative approach is used as a method to analyse the character, situations and theme of the select short fiction.
- 3 Some secondary sources like critical books on AnjanaAppachana, articles in the scholarly journals, anthologies, interviews and internet sources etc. are also used for reaching the significant outcome.
- 4 For making the complete paper in an organized way the support from the 8<sup>th</sup> edition of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Paper* is also used in it.

**Results:**

The proposed research comes to an outcome that identity, liberty and self-respect are the essential elements in the life of a person, especially for women. Anjana shows in the story that the female protagonist attempts to recreate her life in a new way according to her own wishes. This story also reflects gender discrimination in a patriarchal society where a woman has to face injustice even from the time of her birth. It is portrayed in the story that the lady narrator has to come across with various obnoxious situations and her husband doesn’t support her. Instead of giving any relief to his wife the husband neglects her and said that whatever is happening in her life, it is all based on a long-standing tradition and customs of the society so he could do nothing about it. It could be running from years that only the girl’s parents have to do all the things for the in-laws family of their girl starting from the marriage till the birth of the child and even more. And in the society it is always told to the girls that

their father's home is not their home, their own home is their husband's home. It is also shown in the story through the narrator yet after marriage she feels no affection and love in her husband's home by his family members. Here instead of giving any solution and opinion on it she left their readers to ponder over them.

### **Conclusion:**

It is examined from the study that the 'bahu' has to struggle a lot to set up her individuality among the complexities of an Indian patriarchal family. The ending of the story demonstrates the tenets of Diaspora and also reveals the psychological anguish of a daughter-in-law. Even in the family she feels secluded and abandoned who has a split personality and has no place in her home. She feels alienated and lonely even in the presence of her husband as he has also the conservative ideas and unable to understand desires of her wife regarding her privacy, freedom and individualism. This all happens because like any common newly married woman, she also wants to spend some time with her husband Siddharth but she is deprived of it due to the joint and orthodox family where she stays with her husband, her in-laws, sister-in-law, brother-in-law and their son.

In this story it is shown that no one accepts her as their daughter, even her mother-in-law shows the difference between her daughter and 'bahu'. She never accepts her daughter-in-law as her own daughter. Besides this, because of the narrow-mindedness of her husband's family she feels always suppressed and never gets the freedom according to her wishes. They also didn't consider her equally important like their son while she works in a bank and earns like her husband. So finally she decides to leave the house of her husband and chooses to stay alone. Instead of going back to her parents she makes up her mind that she will go to her friend's house where she will have her independent identity, her own 'self' and her home.

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