
The Strategic Survival of Contemporary Women in the Novel Afterwards By Jaishree Misra

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Abstract

Feminism has brought about asympathetic in women. It has made women understand that sexual characteristics are a social concept that requirements to be analysed. As a result, women protested against their misuse and relegation. Avoiding the standards of womanhood, set by men for men, they required to redefine themselves by their own values. The last two eras have seen a fight by western women to depose the legend of femininity and reorder society. This social change was reproduced in the changed appearance of women in literature. Women began to do characters other than the stereotyped ones of give up mother, inactive sister, acquiescent wife, obedient daughter and submissive lover. This research paper focuses on the strategic survival of women characters in the novel Afterwards written by Jaishree Misra in the year 2004. It is a very contemporary fictional writing and hence depicts the instances that happen in this modern day scenario. In the book Feminism and Postfeminism, the author explores the term 'postfeminism' as such, the 'post' in 'postfeminism' implies 'a

process of ongoing transformation and change, rather than assuming that patriarchal discourses and frames of reference have been replaced or superceded. To put it in a nutshell, the point of strategic survival chosen by Maya benefitted her in a large way but on the other hand, one can also bring to light that Anjali finally reached a place where Maya didn't want herself to be. Yet, such a place (ie, Anjali with Govind) after few years is not portrayed in a cynical tone but the novel ends with a good hope for future.

Key words: postfeminism, mrithangam, women in literature, patriarchal discourses, **Strategic Survival**

Introduction:

There are two important strategic points in everyone's life. One is living life and the other is surviving life. Neither one can be static in a person's lifetime because the situations people go through vary in time. Strategic Survival can be defined as the choice of survival or a decision that a person chooses in his/her life to overcome life's challenges. This research paper focuses on the

strategic survival of women characters in the novel *Afterwards* written by JaishreeMisra in the year 2004. It is a very contemporary fictional writing and hence depicts the instances that happen in this modern day scenario. Sarah Gamble in her book *Feminism and Postfeminism* promotes that, “The term ‘postfeminism’ itself originated from within the media in the early 1980s, and has always tended to be used in this context as indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement”(36). This liberation which Gamble talks about is an important characteristic for women in the present century and hence it is the core point through which this research revolves around.

About the Author:

JaishreeMisra is a prominent and a well-known contemporary Indian women writer whose debut novel *Ancient Promises* (2000) became a major bestseller in India. The novel taken for research is her third novel *Afterwards* which concentrates on the protagonist Maya and the consequences of the decisions she took in her life. Maya in the beginning of the novel feels bonded and chained in her marriage and is looking for a trustful help to fly free with her child when at the right time Rahul Tiwari arrives next door to study mrihangam. For Maya, Rahul seemed as a gateway to freedom and she took the most

difficult decision in her life after too many confusions and dilemmas. Rahul helps her to get to London and they live together until one day, sudden news arrives that Maya died in an accident. Though her living presence can be felt in only half of the novel, her absence can also be seen as a constant presence. This novel is amazingly powerful in kindling emotions yet elegantly simple.

Postfeminism:

The characters which are to be focused in this paper are especially Maya and Maya’s mother. Both the women are from different generations but are in the same situations in their marriage life. But the decisions they take as an individual to overcome the challenges they face differ in both their lives. So, by comparing these two characters in the novel it is possible to attain a conclusion to define the survival techniques of women in this era. In the book *Feminism and Postfeminism*, the author explores the term ‘postfeminism’ as such, the ‘post’ in ‘postfeminism’ implies ‘a process of ongoing transformation and change, rather than assuming that patriarchal discourses and frames of reference have been replaced or superceded. So, many novels and books in this contemporary period portray the postfeminist characteristics of women as assertive, stronger and self-assured so that they can be portrayed as in equal stance with men.

Such assertiveness can be clearly viewed in Maya's character in the novel *Afterwards*.

The protagonist, Maya:

There are three stages in Maya's life. The first stage is the time period in which she was married to Govind. The setting which the author chose for such atmosphere is Kerala. The second stage is when she decided to move away with Rahul her neighbour without knowing where her life leads her. Finally, her fate led her to London where Maya, Rahul and Anjali lived for two and a half years. The third stage is the constant presence of Maya even after her death in the lives of her friends and relatives. All these three stages clearly put forth the idea that whatever decisions a person tries to make to better their life, fate plays an important role. Hence the author has shown a clear contrast between illusion and reality, dream versus real in her novel *Afterwards*

It is important to ponder the situation in which Maya thinks she is caged in. Though the novel does not give its readers a linear narrative, it will be apparent if the situations are taken in a chronological narrative. So, in Maya's life, she is married to Govind, a businessman and has a child named Anjali. Her life can be seen as a static scene for the readers from the beginning of the novel until Rahul arrives as a neighbour. The author allows the readers to see Maya's life only through the eyes of Rahul. When Rahul has just reached his temporary home to study mridangam

he could hardly see any movement in the nearby house. The Esteem (Govind) comes in and goes out and other than that one can witness the childish blabbering of Anjali sometimes. Maya tried to converse with Rahul the first day but was afraid of Govind and what his opinion would be about this conversation. Govind in the beginning of the novel is not addressed by name. He is just addressed by his car. So, if the car is present he is also present, if it is not he is not. For instance, Rahul observes that, ". . . I noticed that the Esteem had returned, sometime in the night, taking its place in the car pouch once again" (59).

Not living but surviving:

The most necessary trait that everyone wants in their life is freedom – freedom in thought and action. For this reason many people take extreme decisions in life which prove success for some and sometimes failure too. Such is the situation in which Maya is caught in. She feels trapped in a cage called marriage. And it is not an easy decision to come out of it because of Anjali whom she loves dearly. For instance, when Rahul explains the situation as if Maya is in a cage, she retaliates saying, " 'You must admit it's a *nice* cage, though. Three bedrooms, three attached bathrooms, stainless steel sink in a fully tiled kitchen . . . But, *having* had all those things, I know how little it can all mean if you don't have the really important things in life, Rahul" (56-57). Through this one can imply that the character

feels for herself because she thinks that she is not living her life but merely surviving.

Maya's way of survival:

The prominent part of the novel which has to be analysed in depth, is the way Maya exhibits her strategic survival – whether she passively accepts the situation or is she trying to emerge out of it? From the moment Rahul resides near her as a neighbour she is trying to gain an opportunity to talk to him about her personal life as she sees him as a man would help. If one analyses the conversation that both of them have in the Padmanabhapuram palace it is evident that Maya sees herself as a caged bird who is constantly trying to emerge. But when Rahul hesitates to take her out of the situation she lost hope and gives to the situation becoming a passive acceptant. Rahul's words are as such in the beginning, “ ‘I'm trying to help you. By showing you that you might not be any better off by flying out of the cage you're at the moment, Maya” (57). He says this as he has analysed the possibility of surviving alone in the world like Delhi without a degree and especially with the little child, Anjali.

The atmosphere that the author creates in this situation must be appreciated. When Maya's hope is demolished by Rahul's reality check JaishreeMisra's voice can be heard in Rahul's thoughts, “But the joy of the evening had dimmed as we walked around the slowly darkening interior of the palace” (58). This clearly denotes the

passive acceptance of Maya as she ends up without any hope.

Maya, not a static character:

The transition of the character can be interpreted as in further instances Maya sores high which can be viewed as the strategic point of emergence. In London, everything seems to be normal. Rahul comprehends that, “We had loved our life here, Maya and I. London, we both knew, had given us the space without which our relationship might not have grown and survived” (104). At this point in her life she has attained what she needed long back - the freedom that she yearned for and a perfect life for Anjali. But this point of emergence in her life that she attained due to a drastic decision that she took did not last longer as she unexpectedly and for the shock of everyone she dies in an accident. Fate had another plan for her.

So Maya's transition from passive acceptance to emergence for survival is the strategy that she decided to attain what she searched for in life. This kind of physical movement from Kerala to London in search of freedom could not have happened fifty years back because of the technological advancement. Many incidents in people's life happen in this century because of the high advancement in technology which enables them to take such decisions. This is an important attribute of contemporary fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Societal Views and Strategic Survival:

One can never come to a conclusion whether the decisions taken by the characters are right or wrong. But the consequences can be put forward in the arena and be analysed. Maya tries to come out of the clutches of the patriarchal society and societal stereotypes. She has the reason for taking such a decision as already mentioned above but no one expected her death. She tries to move out of the tradition and she successfully achieved it as an individual but later her daughter Anjali is taken into the circle from which she tries to come out. Rahul envisages his conversation with Anjali in the mere end, “I knew from all the things Maya told me that Govind was old-fashioned, full of conservative beliefs. Govind, oddly, seemed to be taking his cues from me now and scrambled out of his chair after Sandy had shaken his hand, when he saw me getting up from mine” (201). From this statement of Rahul’s one can understand how he observes later in life that Maya’s views on Govind are slightly different from reality. There are two possibilities in which Govind’s character can be analysed. One, Govind’s attitude has been changed in the recent years or that his true self was not viewed by Maya. Either way, the custody of Anjali which is taken by Govind after the death of Maya is not seen in a negative light by the author.

Conclusion:

In an essay titled “Postfeminism vs. the Third Wave” the writer Alison Piepmeier brings to light the basics of postfeminist views which is relevant to this topic of research. He says as such, “Postfeminism relies on competitive individualism and eschews collective action; it obscures or makes invisible the many ways in which women are often fearful, subjected to rape and other kinds of violence, and politically and economically underprivileged”(n.p). Both the characteristics, ie)individualism and collective action can be witnessed in Maya’s life.To put it in a nutshell, the point of strategic survival chosen by Maya benefitted her in a large way but on the other hand, one can also bring to light that Anjali finally reached a place where Maya didn’t want herself to be. Yet, such a place (ie, Anjali with Govind) after few years is not portrayed in a cynical tone but the novel ends with a good hope for future.

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