

Liberation in Padma Desai's *Breaking Out an Indian Woman's American Journey*

S. Abirami, Department of English
V.O. Chidhambaram College, Tuticorin

Abstract

Padma Desai is an Indian born, naturalized American, development economist and a Russia-specialist. Her work *Breaking Out: An Indian Woman's American Journey* is a brave and moving memoir of a woman's journey of transformation: from a sheltered Indian upbringing to success and academic eminence in America.

The present study **Liberation in Padma Desai's *Breaking Out an Indian Woman's American Journey*** presents how women used writing as a tool for their upliftment and how they expressed their voice to come away from the clutches of culture and society. Padma Desai's memoir, *Breaking Out: An Indian Woman's American Journey* was written in 2012. It is a brave and moving memoir of a woman's journey of transformation from the life of an Indian writer. From the provincial world of Surat to forming a new identity through U.S. citizenship and adapting to the New World's culture, she finally came breaking out.

Keywords: Memoir, suppression, liberty

A biography, autobiography and memoir are three genres in literature that tell a life story of a person. A biography is a life history of a person written by someone else. An autobiography is the story of a person's life written by that person itself. A memoir is a collection of memories written by the person themselves.

'Memoirs' and 'Autobiography' are the two genres in literature that sound more similar, but have differences. The amount of time each covers is the difference between Memoir and Autobiography. Autobiographies cover the author's entire life and are usually written in chronological order. Memoirs cover only a particular part of the author's life and can be written either in chronological order or as moving back and forth in time. Memoirs emphasises on emotional experience. The one who write memoir is called Memoirist. They choose a particularly interesting or important incident in their life and write briefly about it. They illustrate them with a theme or subject or stories to give significance. Memoirist may or may not be famous.

Through autobiography, there is a representation of their inner self. Women use more emotional terms while describing life events. Women's autobiographical lives are relational, tied to others and imbricated within communities. A woman who wants to express something her own voice when she is denied a chance to speak, she begins to look for 'substitutional' subjects.

In Padma Desai's autobiography "*Breaking Out*", she tells about her own thoughts she undergone in life by expressing her own emotions. Born and brought up in a circumstance where people around her were restricted to anything, she strived for freedom. The ideal treatment for women is simply respect. A man should treat his wife with the same respect he demands from her.

Padma Desai came through her life, after the right partner she chose. The marriage in which she first indulged gave her the freedom to move to America and carry on with her studies. But in the correct selection of partner the second time, she came out full-fledged in bright colours fading away her past and blooming herself happily into the present. Her ex-husband and their family bid farewell to her to show their modern gestures. Her parents' support was irrelevant here as she is married off. She was in the plan of returning to him and writing to him regularly. She went away with the ominous secret that she had aborted her baby and had venereal diseases. This could be taken as how her husband had let her do things on her own and make it a part of her or how she had come to way of hiding things for not to be judged. In the process of making her career successful, she didn't leave her personal life. She tried to reach her husband. If not the marriage rituals, she would have let her life differently other than finding the love and not searching the feeling.

While performing well she was stricken by the question like "What is the point of all this?" (104) She felt tired and worn out. For almost a week, she kept it to herself and hardly saw anyone and slept a lot. Then only she realized that nobody looked for her or knocked the door and enquired about her examination. This is where she felt "If you choose to hide in your hour of need, you will be left to yourself." (104) This is a kind of freedom we cannot earn in India. The freedom of own space for feelings and not to be disturbed was new in her life yet she adapted to it.

When she visited MIT where she met Jagdish Bhagwati. He was a fellow student in the economics department. After a while, she got a letter from her father suggesting that she should get back to her senses. She wrote a similar letter to her father giving him all the details about the abortion. After getting all the medical details from their family doctor, her mother supported her decision to end the marriage, saying "I know how my daughter feels. She cannot go back to this man who was unfaithful to her." (113)

For Padma Desai, it took three long years to come to senses for thinking of ending the marriage. Her mind was liberated as she went beyond the ties of the family, that gave her this decision. However, the legal proceedings were shameful and bought humiliation to the family. Forgetting the Harvard PhD, she was a disgrace to the family name. She remarks: "First a marriage of my choosing. Then a lawsuit seeking to dissolve it and all in an Indian provincial town of fifty years ago." (116)

Her ex-husband was indeed the victim, he had patiently put up with the long separation while she lived in America, educated herself and caught the 'American air' because of which she decided to walk out of the marriage. The judge lectured her about the traditional Indian virtues of fidelity and wifely commitment.

Padma opted to work in Delhi School of Economics. Her father was upset so refused to give her money. Somehow, she got a job and found a place nearer to her sister. The Delhi job gave her financial independence and a stay away from Surat.

She was the only one who pushed the boundary of marrying within the sub-caste, forcing her father into painful decisions that went against divorce and then the conversion to Christianity. When her father forwarded baptism certificate for judicial process, the lawyer told that her ex-husband had changed his mind and not interested in pursuing this idea further. Was this conversion pointless? She thought this as a convenient expedient to dissolve the deadlocked situation and win her life back so that she could be happy. But she treasured the conversion as a gift of purity from one human being to another.

Jagdish's desire to marry her caused her self-conscious and cautionary mood. She couldn't accept his love neither reject him. He found her sister's address and met her after nine years. They felt that they could begin a new life together escaped from day to day. Later both the family members realized that they were seriously involved. Her mother-in-law was from her mother's generation. She has limited their daughters-in-law to some extent and yet loved and cared them equally. But son-preference was her priority. The way she treats her daughter-in-law is to be appreciated as she gives them equal importance in everything. In America, she searched for untouchable sweeper women. This shows though she gets adapted to the American ways or modern ways, she is always inclined to the habits of India.

More than women's liberation, a man who supports them is the strength to them. Later when he went to England, he asked her to join him for a European holiday. She found this as an opportunity for her past to fade away. She joined him. They were together in love without experiencing guilt or committing transgression or breaking social norms.

Her husband was the support and the reason behind her success. He accepted her after knowing all the pains she had undergone. He was with her in all phases helping her. The process of liberation happens only when the urge to be set free meets the right person. Padma has met the right person which made her bloom in sorts of her life. A freedom that is accessible to her not because it must be given; only because it is right.

Padma's daughter, on the other hand, had been under the shades of American lifestyle and culture of India. At the age of nine, she confronted her with a daring voice "You would let me walk to school by myself if I were a boy, wouldn't you?" (177) Two days later she made her way to school alone. Padma and Jagdish were afraid when she had decided to join

Outward Bound. They were much happy on her return as they had signed a form which had warned she might return in body sag. She always looked for adventure. She was daring and challenging. Finally, she joined in the United States Marine Corps programme. They were afraid and did not know whether she would bear the costs of their ignorance and undergo the hazards of her innocence.

As she was worried about her safety, she bought two dogs and named them, Shiva and Uma, names which were linked with Indian mythology. Lord Shiva was endowed with the male and the female attributes of a hermaphrodite, with powers to destroy as well to create. The resemblance of Hindu mythology shows that though she is brought up in ways of western system, she has the roots of India within her.

The life which Anuradha lived was entirely different from the previous generation women's life. She gained all the freedom which even Padma did not get. From travelling alone to choosing careers at the best, she followed her mother. The education and freedom which she has earned was the reason behind her success and daring notions.

Women should have a voice to talk about their problems which indeed is the major way to solve their issues. Through this half journey into the book, one can understand how the system changes through generations and time. The past Indian society raised women as dependent people during all the stages of their life and the method of raising a girl child controls her behaviour till her end. It is evident from this story that children who are raised in a conservative environment will tend to keep themselves under subservience even when they are given a chance to liberate.

Padma's migration to the United States of America sheds light on her salvation from the clutches of the patriarchal society. The approach in which women operate in the free country encourages her to jump over the boundaries she would have never dared to cross before. This memoir highlights that women have to engage in the outside world and not hide inside the four walls of their house.

Works Cited

1. Desai, Padma. *Breaking Out: An Indian Woman's American Journey*. Penguin Random House India, 2012.
2. Patel, Vibhuti. "Escape to Victory, from India to the U.S." *The Hindu*, 2 July 2012.
3. Sultana, Abeda. "Patriarchy and Women's Subordination: A Theoretical Analysis." *The Arts Faculty Journal*, vol. 4, 2012, pp. 1-18, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3329/afj.v4i0.12929>.
4. Upadhyay, Viral. "Padma Desai's Autobiography Breaking Out: An Indian Woman's American Journey as a Social Discourse." *The Journey of Indian Language: Perspective on Culture and Society*, vol.1,2019, pp. 77-83 <http://baou.edu.in/assets/downloads/Viral%20Upadhyay.pdf>.