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FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

Dr.S.MOHAN

Assistant Professor-I

Department of English, Kalasalingam University, Krishnankoil, Srivilliputhur.
Tamilnadu, India.



Dr.S.MOHAN

ABSTRACT

Feminism in western countries are embodied in literature and other books, that is in written form but in the east, particularly in countries like India, owing to its oral tradition and greater illiteracy, the impact of these studies was restricted to the urban population. But in recent years, even the rural areas have been covered due to the ever-spreading wing of electronic media. Since the last few decades, women have been trying their hands at writings and that too successfully. Apart from the modern Indian rang ages, Indian women have been writing in English. Whether they are poets, novelist, playwrights, short story writers and critics, they are no longer lagging behind their male counterparts. Their literary creation has acquired a permanent place in the gamut of world literature. They have contributed significantly in the enrichment of Indian English writings, particularly in the genre of fiction. The women novelists of India have reached the zenith of success and won global recognition. The most prominent among them are Cornelia Sorabji, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawar Jhabwala, Anita Desai, Shakundala shrinagessh, Santha Rama Rau, Arundhai Roy, Bharathi Mukherjee.

Key Words: Protagonist, Socio- Political Realities, Existential Predicament, Feminine identity

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Among these eminent Indian women novelists writing in English, Anita Desai is one who is more interested in the interior landscape of the mind rather than in politics or socio- political realities. Desai's protagonists are women. Who have reached different stages in life: Even then, they are fragile introverts trapped in their own skin. Their emotional traumas sometimes lead to a violent death. Besides the central theme of her novels is the existential predicament of women as an individual. She projects this phenomenon through incompatible couples, in actuality, sensitive and dutiful wives but insensitive and un-understanding husbands. Her fictional milieu is the India in transition with its cultural and ethical values in the melting pot. In each of her novels, one could sense the novelists urge for a way of living, which would respond to the inner most yearning of the India women for self-emancipation and self-dignity.

As Anita Desai is interested in the exploration of female psyche dealing with thoughts, emotions and sensations at various level of consciousness, she found the technique used by D.H .Lawrence, Virginia Woolf,

William Faulkner and Henry James is quite suitable for her purpose of character delineation. Her characters are almost sick of life and listless playthings of their morbid psychic longings, most of her female protagonists are abnormally sensitive and unusually solitary to the point of being neurotic, for example, Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*, Monisha in *Voice in The City*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* and Nanda in *Fire On The Mountain*.

In her maiden novel *Cry, The Peacock* (1963), Maya the chief female protagonist is obsessed almost from the beginning of the novel with awesome prophecy of an albino astrologer. According to the prophecy, she or her husband would die during the fourth year of her marriage. Maya's marriage to Gautam with the lack of emotional attachment is in contrast to her joyous childhood. Those past memories over shadow her present with gloom. She can establish no effective communication with her husband. Maya's life is woven to her instincts and longs for emotional and physical satisfaction in marital life but both these are denied to her, one by Gautam's intellectually and indifference and the other by his age. Further, Maya's sensuous thrills and excitement are dampened by the non-attachment philosophy of the Bhagwad Gita. She is childless which accentuates her isolation and this frustration becomes total when she murders her husband in a fit of insane fury. Maya seeks communion of the kind the peacock seeks and makes intense mating calls. Through Maya's tragic end, Desai tries to emphasize the great yearning of the women to be understood by her male partner.

In her novel, *Voice in the City*, Desai sets the story in Calcutta, the city of goddess Kali, the Goddess of death, to narrate a tale of alienated individuals. Nirode and his two sisters, Monisha and Amla rebel against the solid conventions of middle class life and crave for creativity and self-expression. Each of them encounters grief. Nirode ends up as a drifting Bohemian, Monisha commits suicides and Amla is heart-broken when her love is rejected. So this novel too, projects the novelists prime concern to depict the existential predicament of women as an individual. Desai urges to find a suitable way of living, which would respond to the innermost yearning of Indian women for their emancipation.

Both in *Cry, The Peacock and Voice In The City*, Desai deals with the problem of communication between husband and wife. In the marital relationships of Gautam and Maya, Jiban and Monisha,, She depicts the psychological suffering of women[wives] on account of the passive, indifferent and callous attitude of men[husbands]. Both Maya and Monisha seek real companionship from their life-partners. Here, Desai is concerned with the emancipation of the women, actually the emancipation of their souls within the corpus of matrimonial bonds. The childlessness of Maya and Monisha leads to their frustration and throws a flood of light on the depression of educated women of India who fail to build their bright careers and are compelled to marry with egocentric individuals to maintain the prevailing norms and customs of the society.

In her novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* [1975] Desai unveil a world of inner reality in which Sita, the protagonist is less morbid than Maya who has four children. The cruelty and conceived again, she grows panicky at the thought of bringing a new fragile being into this harsh world and so runs away to a small island, Manori, which has childhood associations with her, but eventually she allows her husband to persuade her to return. This island is an evocative symbol of a lost paradise. This novel dramatizes the theme of alienation and lack of communication in marital life in a controlled and less exotic manner and reminds us of Virginia Woolf's *To the Light House*, Desai explores the world of women where their dignity and self-respect is under the attack of psychological dissatisfaction. Sometimes, they are treated as performing animals, as treated by their keepers. She wants to convey through their portrayals that the spirits of companionship based on mutual understanding give meanings to life. In the Indian society where patriarchy prevails as the dominating force, women lead lives of dependency a completely parasitic existence, loneliness, contented with their husband's unreciprocated emotionality.

Desai's characters are not projected as representative of a homogeneous category: they testify to the heterogeneity of female experience and the need to recognize the situations of all frames of oppression as well as all modes of resistance. There is no attempt in Desai's novels to create a pan Indian identity, although the characters are culturally defined by their location, attitudes and memories. In *Journey to Ithaca*, the central characters are not India, although India continues to function as a catalyst in the dramatic changes that

overtake their lives. Realism is a mode Desai had once rejected in favour of the language of the interior, but as her recent statements indicate this does not imply blindness to writer's social role:

I think society is always rather uncomfortable when it has a writer in its midst because the writer is thought of as a critic or as a satirist or else somebody that uncovers uncomfortable truth. I think a writer has to assume that role although it's not given to him. He has to seize it, cling to it, and hold on to it. It is considered a particularly unseemly role for women to play (p-85).

As a critic of society, the writer may however choose non-realistic narrative modes. Without overt recourse to fantasy or magic realism, Desai's novels, especially *Journey to Ithaca*, include a visionary dimension suggestive of epistemological modes that are intuitive rather than rational. Her novels also assert their literariness through complex intersexual engagement with texts from diverse sources. These features do not constitute a rejection of the real; they demand recognition that the real may be negotiated, by the fiction writer in more ways than one.

For a novel about family life, *Clear Light of Day* has surprisingly large number of characters who are single women, surviving on the periphery of a society that regards marriage and motherhood as the primary female goal. Bim has several shadow selves who inhabits this impossible realm. The plight of Mira Masi, a poor, childless widow is only an extreme version of the dependency of the Mira sisters, back in their father's house after their marriages have failed, trying now to eke out of meagre living from music and dance lessons while their brothers lead an indolent life.

In all her novels, Anita Desai conveys the inner urges of her female protagonists through interior monologue, the diary writing and the depiction of a situation, which echoes of situation where feelings are revealed suddenly with dramatic impacts. Such techniques help her to delve deeper into the inner world of the women and delineated their psycho emotional reality in totality. What is more significant about her technique is that she never tries to justify the actions of the women protagonists in her fictional world but grants freedom to act in their own ways. In this way, she has made sincere endeavour to contribute to the Indian fiction with a feminist concern, though she has carefully avoided associating herself with any feminist movement. Declaring her concern with individual man and women, she makes her novels revolve around some men and woman of exception, often round incompatible couples and strives to explore the feminine psyche of her female characters in varied moods and nuances. Her characters typically comprise women of all age group- from a girl to the old women and of different types-intellectual, hypersensitive, typical homemaker unmarried woman etc. This brings Desai's writings to the corpus of women's writings indeed.

In Desai's Women we find constant search of a landscape to accommodate their need for their refusal to their refusal of the patrilineal society. Thus, garden of Maya, Manori of Sita, are their respective resorts to solace their distraught beings. What strikes us in the nature to refusal to patriarchy and bondage by Desai's women protagonists is that they are conscious of their victimhood and abjection and their inert desire to respond to the need for self representation and independent of their identity being intricately associated with her male relatives.

The grant of equal status to woman with man by the constitution post independence, the women liberation movements of the 1960s, post modern onslaught, western feminism all gave way to the creation of a new woman with her own desire and ambition, quest to break off the shackles of bondage that binds her to the patriarchal norms of subjection and abjection that de value her. Most of the woman protagonists are educated women groaning under self-conflict under circumstances of marriage, to their traditionally assigned roles. Post independence Indian woman novelist in English or even in regional genres show educated woman in the changed socio-economic conditions, revolting to their exploitation, sceptical to the traditional roles assigned to them, the inevitability of marriage, patriarchy and male chauvinism. Post independent literary writings of Indian woman writers have redefined discourse on women. They have given a voice to the revolting consciousness of the womenfolk. The current case study Anita Desai has performed a significant function of instilling a positive "feminine" identity rather a female identity, role model women who deters the dependence on men. She has given a voice to the new Indian woman.

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