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MARITAL CONFLICT IN ANITA DESAI'S *IN CUSTODY*

Dr. INDU SHARMA

Department of English, Cluster University of Jammu, Jammu



ABSTRACT

This paper tries to present the thematic problem of man-woman relationship and the importance of love in marriage. Although the theme of husband and wife alienation and marital disharmony is not a new theme in the novels of women writers, but with depth of the writing of Desai it gains new depth and meaning. *In Custody*, Desai points out the incompatibility of man and woman in carrying out their marriage, love, compatibility due to the predicament of modern world tension and stressful life. Women always shown to long for love and communion of the spirit with their partners who tend to reciprocate their feelings. According to Desai, most marriages prove to be unions of incompatibility. Her women long for love and communion of the spirit which they perceive as the panacea of the ills of the world. The writer primary emphasis is on sights and sounds, on movements and patterns both physical and mental as they impinge on the consciousness.

**Key Words:** Alienation, stress, incompatibility, communion.

*Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society* – Simone De Beauvoir

Of all the contemporary Indian English novelists, Anita Desai is indisputable the most powerful women novelist. She has emerged as a very serious, skilled and promising novelist in Indian society. She has begun to write in English at the age of seven and published her first story at the age of nine. She made her own illustrations for them, securing them into covers to move them appear as books. She started her career as a short-story writer but later takes novels as a full form for writing. Bande comments, "She (Desai) prefers novels to short stories because the form of the novel gives her a good deal of thought and time to get round the subject (7). She is considered as the writer who introduced the psychological novel in the tradition of Virginia Woolf to India. In her novels, she gives voice to mute the miseries and helplessness of millions of men and women tormented by existentialist problems. Endowed with the endless imaginative resources, highly sensitive nature to understand human predicament and creative vitality, she reveals amazing variety and profundity in her fictional world.

The novel *In Custody* (1984), presented the thematic problem of man-woman relationship, the importance of love in marriage. Although the theme of husband and wife alienation and marital disharmony is not a new theme in the novels of women writers, but with depth of the writing of Desai it gains new depth and meaning. In her novels, Desai points out the incompatibility of man and woman in carrying out their marriage, love, compatibility due to the predicament of modern world tension and stressful life. Women always shown to long for love and communion of the spirit with their partners who tend to reciprocate their feelings. According to Desai, most marriages prove to be unions of incompatibility. Her women long for love and communion of the spirit which they perceive as the panacea of the ills of the world. The writer primary

emphasis is on sights and sounds, on movements and patterns both physical and mental as they impinge on the consciousness. In this particular novel, Desai explores the male psyche instead of woman and takes up such questions as poetry, language and nature of art with respect to men.

The novel *In Custody* analyses the problem of Deven Sharma an impoverished college lecturer. After his marriage with a sullen and dull lady Sarla, Deven sees a way to escape from the meanness and hopelessness of daily life. He is temporary lecturer in a private college but he lives in a fool's paradise. His extreme devotion to art leads him to indifference to his wife. Rather he has cultivated an aversion to and dislike for his wife. Here Desai deals with a purely marital problem of this materialistic civilization in a pent-up city like Delhi, where the relation of husband and wife is always under strain. Relationship between Sarla and Deven is not satisfactory. Deven refuses to respond to her approaches and bars her entry into his world. It appears that while reading Desai's novels, her predominant is not with society but with the individual psyche and its interaction with social values

Deven Sharma wanders in search of money only. He craves for named dreams of gold bangles of his wife Sarla. He plans a Utopian and lives in a dreamy world. However, his wife Sarla puzzled by these dreams of Deven. She has to satisfy with a husband who maintains aloof from his wife and always indulge in his imaginative world. He is of the opinion that marriage has clogged his progress in life and feels dejected. In his relation with his wife there is lack of harmony, adjustment, and concordance. He considers himself to be trapped by domesticity, marriage and a job and longs for release, "He had never found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings (25)".

Deven could never understand that as a wife Sarla needs love and affection more than money. She needs sympathy, consolation, appreciation of her work and sharing of pain and pleasure with her husband. In the married life of Sarla and Deven, there is only marriage for name sake— no love and affection prevails there. This problem of marriage and love is dealt in detail by Desai. In *Custody*, Desai presents a kind of humour and pathos of married relations that he wants to be more familiar and closer with others. Marriage means communion of two souls and two bodies into spiritual harmony. But there is only lust and sexual desires. Under the complicated situations prevailing in the novel, Deven felt pessimistic and pained to notice the bad aspect of his married life. He feels haunted and aged. Neither Deven nor Sarla understands each other. Deven feels that she does not care for him and his wife always neglected him. So, he starts engaging himself with other women. Both feel insulted and humiliated living in one room. No one tries to understand the heart of other person.

It is only at the end of the novel Deven admits and understands her disappointment. The reason for it is that he also felt defeated like her and became the victim of his circumstances. In the common problems of post-marital life, he came to understand her predicament also. It is true that Deven leads a very cultured life of a college lecturer grooming under the crushing agonies of poverty. But at the same time there is another aspect of married life, marital relationships. All the time Deven thinks about his wife and son. He wants money not for himself but for his family. He desires to buy gold jewellery for his wife. He says, "I have my job to think of and my wife and son." Desai's fiction is symbolic, sensitive and psychological. Her fictional word reflects her concerns with psyche of her characters. Brati Biswas in *Perspectives on Anita Desai*:

By writing novels and stories that are psychological and purely subjective, She (Anita Desai) was free to employ, simply the language of the interior. She further states even when two characters meet, they use this particular type of language— the language of their thoughts of their interior selves – which has nothing to do with geography. (147)

Sarla also tries to fulfil her duties of a wife and mother when Deven needs support. But the main reason behind the failure of their marriage is that it was an arrange marriage and not a love marriage. Although in love marriage, one knew the person already still they have to develop compatibility, understanding, and start adjusting according to the need of other person. However, in their marriage love was nowhere. There was no one in Deven's family side who can think through the perspective of Sarla i.e. as a newly-wed bride she too can have aspirations, desires or perspective. In Indian scenario, marriage is always through the perspective of a fairy tale where there is all love in the air. But the real life is altogether different. By marrying to an academic professor on temporary basis, too in a small town of Mirpore, none of her dreams materialized. And this is one

of the causes that make her embittered. Deven was also disappointed as he is depicted as victim, but still he has poetry in which he can find some solace, whereas Sarla has nothing with her. That leads to Sarla sarcastic tone, bitterer outlook and depressed psychic. Desai depicts Deven's problems on both the fronts- home and college. Therefore, the character of Sarla and Deven possesses the qualities of introspection, introversion and has refusal to surrender their individual selves and this is the underlying problem for non-compatibility in their marriage. In this regard B. Ramachandra Rao opines:

...instead of portraying character in terms of the environment of defining an individual in terms of his social or caste functions. Mrs. Desai creates character and the environment is important only in so far as it enables the reader to understand the character. Moreover the true artist that she is, Mrs. Desai presents each individual as an unsolved mystery. (87)

Desai also provides one more aspect of marriage in the novel i.e. Nur and his two wives, where elder wife stands for duty, the second one for love. Nur and Imtiaz Begum do care for each-other to certain extent. Nur for her treatment wishes to admit her to the hospital, but she refuses. She is of the opinion that she will die not because of illness but due to be deprived of the affection from her loving husband. Nur therefore decides to nurse her. In this case, there is enormous attachment between husband and wife is shown by the writer as compared with Deven and Sarla who only dwells in their inner compartments of individual identity and not the collective one. She portrays the rebellious characters of the society whether male or female who stands up against the set system of the society which can make the life of an individual burden with their heavy dogmas. Desai tries to present the farcial nature of all the marriages, the illusory quality of all human relationships, male and female. In one way, the presentation of man-woman relationship in patriarchal society reveals her concern and understanding of different forms of woman's experience. In her previous novels, male protagonists fail to reciprocate the feelings of their female part. But in this particular novel of Desai, we find that the women characters mock at the poetic sensibilities of their husband and fail to meet the corporeal needs of their husband.

Thus, Anita Desai being a woman of feminine sensibility tries to probe deep into the psyche of man-woman with regard to marriage. The reason that she figures out is the casual approach towards marriage which lead to the indifferences in marriage. Women are expected to adjust with the changing family and surroundings. The adjustment for woman means deleting herself, her conscience over her family. And if a woman acts totally contrary with the role assigned by the society towards that there will be a disharmony. It also does not mean that woman has to do all the sacrifices. In fact, Desai suggests that man and woman have to come to such a pedestal where they do not behave as a single entity but collectively think about themselves i.e. going from 'I' to 'WE'.

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