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SPARK OF SOCIAL REALISM, SPIRITUALISM AND INDIAN ETHOS IN ANITA DESAI

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ABSTRACT

As the harbinger of the twentieth century, *Anita Desai* holds a very dominant and prominent place in Indian English literature. She has written many beautiful novels dealing with social realities of man-woman relationships, spiritual quest and Indian culture and ethos. Particularly being a feminist, she has raised her voices against female exploitation and gender-discrimination done to the females in this *phallogocentric* society. Her famous novels are the *Cry, The Peacock, Voices in the City, Where shall We Go This Summer, Fire on the Mountain, Clear Light of Day, Bye-Bye Blackbird* etc. Apart from all these literary creations, she has also written many other novels. Her novel-*Fasting, Feasting* is a powerful representation of patriarchal society governed by its dual value system. Her maiden novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, beautifully portrays the exploration of the psychic realities of characters. *Maya*, a hypersensitive woman, gets physically and mentally divorced from her middle-aged, pragmatic and rational husband *Gautama*. Her second novel- *Voices in the City* deals with the struggle of men and women of *Calcutta* striving for a higher life of conscience and values. One of the female characters *Monisha*, is the victim of a suffocated and isolated married life with *Jiban*, an insensitive being. Her novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* also focusses on the conjugal life of *Adit* and *Sarah*, facing the problems of mutual adjustment with each other's cultures. Her another novel- *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* deals with marital incompatibility between *Raman* and *Sita*. They happen to stand as a contrast to the mythical *Ram* and *Sita* who are a symbol of the perfection of conjugal relations and sacrifice. Her next novel - *Fire on the Mountain* which brought her *Sahitya Akademi Award of 1978*, unveils the forced alienation of *Nanda Kaul* and the secluded life of *Raka*, her great grand-daughter. Her later novel- *Baumgartner's Bombay* widened her thematic horizons. This one focusses on the struggle of *Hugo Baumgartner* who suffers from imposed homelessness.

This paper is dwelt upon the exploration of the various shades of social realism, spiritualism and Indian ethos in the novels of *Anita Desai*. As a representative of the contemporary English fiction, she has basically dealt with the themes of cultural clash, alienation, identity-crisis, gender-discrimination, the female exploitation, Indian ethos, social injustice, socio-economic and cultural reality as the themes of her novels. Apart from all these themes, she is also intended to explore the hidden mysteries of self-enlightenment and spiritual awakening in her novel *Journey to Ithaca*. Thus there are different colours and a vast range of her novels dealing

with the various issues in the contemporary Indian society. Let us find out these various themes as stated above in her novels.

Her famous novel-*Fasting, Feasting* represents the problem of cultural contrast-between the cultures of *India and America*. The plot unveils through the perceptions of *Uma* in, India, and of *Arun*, in *America*. Both of them happen to get entrapped, being unmindful of their respective cultures. She unveils the realistic face of the society where the issue of gender-discrimination has crept away. The characters, here, represent the society where daughters are kept at the periphery and the life rotates around the son. Basically it highlights the problem of sexual discrimination meted out to a girl child. She very dexterously unveils the realistic fabric of the society and introduces the readers with gruesome, detestable treatment done to the females. It is a very disastrous story of the unfortunate daughters and sisters, married and forgotten without even the least care of their future. It is the pitiable face of the sick society where the birth of a son is celebrated with pride, joy and felicity and considered a great blessing while daughters are treated as life-long burden. Through this novel, she expresses her great concern for the cause of females and points out the drawbacks and loopholes in this system. Such a representation puts the entire society to a great shame. This novel is a story of a simple, divorced girl *Uma*, who becomes the victim of a brutal society following the conventional and overbearing attitude of her parents. Richardson's comments are very much suggestive and relevant of the nature of her parents:—

“In Papa and Mama, the Indian parents, she (Anita Desai) creates two monsters of almost Gothic proportions, locked into inseparable marital disharmony, determined to inflict on their two daughters and only son every ounce of the prejudice and disappointments of their own lives, as a respectable barrister and his wife in an undistinguished town”<sup>1</sup>

*Uma*, the protagonist and narrator was a grown-up woman when her mother finds herself pregnant and wishes to get it terminated because of her illness. But *Uma's* father always wished to preferably to have a son in the family, the late pregnancy of his wife tempts him to take a chance of fathering a son. Though there were two grown-up daughters in the family, yet *Papa's* desire to have a son was almost uncontrollable. *Anita Desai*, here, ridicules at the Indian mentality of the society to give undue importance to sons.

“*Would anyman give up the chance of a son?*”<sup>2</sup> The overimportance bestowed upon a son results in negligence and humiliation towards a girl-child. Strong disliking towards *Uma* is a depiction of this social reality.

During her pregnancy, the father provided every care to the mother and ultimately, she delivers a son. His birth remains a great memorable event for *Uma* and her younger sister, *Aruna*. Throughout their life, they had felt totally different behaviour of their father. But on the birth of their brother, the reaction of overwhelming father sharply pricks their conscience.

This vulgar display of merriment at the birth of a son reflects typical attitude of male member in a patriarchal society. But such a piece of reaction before the two grown-up daughters, who by this age understand the process of pregnancy and birth is really very much shameful and disgusting. Along with this, it also communicates a message that *Uma* and *Aruna* and their status in the family is ignorable. Expression of a great joy at the birth of their brother *Arun* symbolizes that he received much more importance in the family. The jubiant call of the father ‘*A boy ..... A bo-oy' Arun, Arun* at last! clearly indicates that the daughters were unwanted, from the very beginning he was aspiring for a male child.

This is not the reaction of an individual to the circumstances, the father represents the whole class of male members, rather than the whole society. After the delivery of her brother *Arun*, *Uma* had to support her mother in his nourishment. Though *Uma* is a very poor student, yet she is very passionate and enthusiastic towards her studies. She gets failed in the examination and it provides an excuse to her parents and they withdraw her from the school without even the least care of her future. The disgraceful comments of her mother

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Robinson, “Families that Don't Function,” *The Spectator*, 5 June 1999, P. 39

<sup>2</sup> Anita Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* (London : Chatto and Windus, 1999) P. 16

reveal her attitude regarding the future of her girl child *Uma*. She says, "What is the use of going back to school, if you keep failing, *Uma*? You will be happier at home ..... You would not need to do any lessons. You are a big girl now. We are trying to arrange a marriage for you. Till then, you can help me look after *Arun*. And learn to run the house:" (22). Her parents never give any importance to her education, if she had to do her homework, the mother would thrust all household responsibilities on her, negating her interest and other priorities of her like. *Uma* used to plead, "I have got to get my sums done and then write the composition – "Leave all that", *Mama snapped at her*" (18). Her mother never thought seriously that *Uma* had to study at home to complete her assignments. *Uma's* mother can still be excused for neglecting her daughter's study but even an educated person and a barrister, the father never made any effort to educate his daughter or to provide her training in any other skill or creative work that might have improved her personality. It is possible that *Uma* could have passed her exam as her keen interest in education, if she had been provided tuition facilities. Though *Uma* assures them to get success in exam and pleads with *Mother Agnes* to persuade her parents to allow her to continue her education but their decision remains unchanged.

"The joint control exercised by *Mama Papa* is equally destructive and life-denying. Rituals begin to seem meaningless after sometime, fears become obsessive and channels of communication are disrupted."<sup>3</sup>

Besides being a very keen social realist, she has also done a spiritual quest in her novel – *Journey to Ithaca*. There is a comment about the originality of her genius and a great talent – "*Anita Desai, who occupies a distinct and distinctive place in the realm of contemporary Indian English fiction*".<sup>4</sup> is undoubtedly one of the most powerful Indian novelists in English.<sup>5</sup>

In the novel- *Journey to Ithaca*, she picks up a new topic, continuing her journey something like that of a well-known *Upanisadic* terms '*Charaybeti*' (go ahead, don't stop). She happens to begin her journey with a fixed or unfixed intention in search of the root of spirituality. With this intention, it is better to go ahead in search of the roots from where the mystery of the truth, the eternal journey of the existence starts than live as slaves without making efforts to gain something new.

This novel is about the soul's journey to enlightenment and awakening. Unlike *E.M. Forster's 'A Passage to India'*, which largely seems to grasp the 'mystery' and where the borderline between the 'middle' and the 'mystery' is never clearly drawn. Someone comments- "*This novel is Anita Desai's assertive statement that the truth, the enlightenment and the totality of an all-encompassing spirituality is in heart of India*".<sup>6</sup>

*Ithaca* is here symbolically drawn as the certain lighthouse which eternally summons man to wander, to be in quest of spiritual truth, heart's truth, a quest for reaching one's homeland. And man's inner self is his true homeland.

In a way, *Journey to Ithaca* is about one's journey within over self, a journey towards India – the land of the destination, the thought, the vision, and the philosophy. This novel is a saga of multiple journeys undertaken by three different characters at different planes of existence. While the journey of the first two *Matteo* and the *Mother*, culminates in India, that of *Sophie* commences from India. There is an interconnection between each of these journeys and it never ends. As *Desai* aptly quotes in the epigraphy to *Journey to Ithaca*.

*Always Keep Ithaca fixed in your mind  
To arrive there is our ultimate goal,  
But don't hurry the voyage at all*

<sup>3</sup> Jasbir Jain, *Stairs of the Attic : The Novels of Anita Desai* (Jaipur Printwell, 1999) P. 191

<sup>4</sup> Suman Jana, "Journey to Ithaca : A Quest Novel," *Critical Responses to Anita Desai*, ed. Shubha Tiwari (New Delhi : Atlantic, 2004) Vol. 2, P. 353

<sup>5</sup> A.K. Bachchan, "Anita Desai's Journey to Ithaca" : A Novel of Spiritual Quest," *The Indian Journal of English Studies*, Vol. XLI (2003-04), P. 161

<sup>6</sup> R.S. Pathak, "The Alienated Self in the Novels of Anita Desai," *Indian Woman Novelists*, ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi, Prestige, 1991) Set. I, Vol. 2, P. 11

*It is better to let it last for long years.*<sup>7</sup>

*Matteo's* journey to Ithaca forms the centre-stage for the first part of the novel. Born in a luxuriant Italian family, *Matteo* makes his journey in search of brightness in the heart of his *Ithaca*-the mystery that is in India the India which above is aware of the mystery. It is the India 'a *punya bhumi*' where man comes across the blessed people and quenches his insatiable thirst and which has continued to influence and fascinate the western mind. *Matteo* right from his childhood had been a peculiar child defying the decency and decorum of his home. Thus *Matteo* and *Sophie* move towards India in search of peace. Thus novel exposes the revolt of the two female characters done against their surroundings: *Sophie* and *Laila*. *Sophie* pursues worldly freedom while *Laila* aspires for spiritual freedom. In this novel, *Anita Desai* is intended to achieve something unmatched. She strongly holds the view that all religions of the world would mingle into a single stream, representing the religion of humanity symbolized in the character of *Laila*. She also concentrates on how to bring spiritual change in man and — "attains a harmonious, clear vision of India, a sense of delighted, joyous, serene fulfillment".<sup>8</sup>

Thus *Journey to Ithaca* is a totally different novel from the other ones of *Anita Desai*, a novel of persistent journey tracing the root of spiritual origin (*Gyan*) like the Indian Concept of *anantyaatra*, the seed of which lies deep down in the Indian heritage.

Contemporary life is replete with aspirations, dilemmas paradoxes, ironies and complexities. Alienation is not a new emotion, rather it has been attached to man since his emergence on this earth. Modern complexities have been artistically woven into the fabric of writing and successfully presented in the realm of literary canons. Distinctive writers belonging to different literary genres in their respective ways have revealed the suppressed, lonely beings in their works. With the emergence of the great psychologist *Sigmund Freud*, this hidden unexplored aspect started getting exposed more often. The leading novelists in this genre of writing are *Henry James*, *James Joyce*, *Dorothy Richardson*, *Anita Desai* and *Virginia Woolf*.

The above-mentioned novelists brought about a novelty of psychological realism in the field of novels. Their mode of writing has deeply influenced a wide range of writers all over the world, from *America to India*, and *Anita Desai* is no exception. She has provided a new dimension to Indian English fiction by exploring the inner sensibilities of characters. She has exposed the pain, frustration and loneliness of the people in this insensitive, inconsiderate and materialistic world.

Let us now find out the fragrance of Indian ethos in her novels. Being a woman, she understands very well the problems of this female world in the male-dominated society. Her novels beautifully expose the real face of the Indian society. Her maiden novel, *Cry, the peacock* unveils the psychic realities of characters – male and female both. The novel unveils the real picture of the lack of mutual adjustment and mutual understanding in the matrimonial relationship between *Maya*, a hypersensitive woman and the rational and pragmatic husband *Gautama* Ignorance and negligence of *Gautama* for *Maya* is very clearly visible in her cry:

Telling me to go to sleep while he worker at his papers, he did not give another thought to me to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed. (P. 9)

The grieved mind of *Maya* pushes her into the dark corridors of alienation. She is frustrated at the cold attitude of *Gautama*. Her sexual discontentment makes her situation much more worse with each passing day. *Gautama* did not entertain any kind of interruption in his work. Even when *Maya* reports him of the death of their pet dog, *Toto*, he considers it a trivial matter. Being an issueless woman, she has a great attachment with her pet and her husband was very much aware of their intimacy. Despite knowing all these things, he kept ignoring his feelings and emotions without showing his grief. His psychic absence for her, despite his physical presence is very much clear in the following lines –

<sup>7</sup> Anita Desai, *Journey to Ithaca* (New Delhi : Ravi Dayal, 1996) P. 3

<sup>8</sup> Rama Kundu, "Journey to the East Once Again : Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*," *Critical Responses to Anita Desai*, ed. Shubha Tiwari, Vol. 2, P. 283

His coldness, his coldness and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk, and talking reveal myself. It is that – My loneliness in this house. (P.9)

*Maya's* alienation is an outcome of her excessive love and expectations from her counterpart. Her disillusionment with the basic realities of the metropolis drags her into a life of living hell.

Another shade of Indian ethos is beautifully projected in her second novel– *Voices in the City*. This novel reveals the picture of *Calcutta* where couple of men and women are struggling for light and lusture and a higher dignity. One of the female characters *Monisha* is bound to lead a suffocational married life with *Jiban*, an insensitive being. Her matrimonial life is full of frustrations. There is a lack of mutual adjustment in their matrimonial relationship. She feels herself lonely, supportless and companionless in this dark world. Her pitiable survival is reflective in the following lines —

One must have someone who reciprocates, who responds. One must have that – reciprocation – I think (P. 197).

The character of *Manisha* represents the common picture of an Indian woman in this rude Indian society where males are lacking in love and respect for women. She is so much depressed and frustrated that she prefers death to survival. Her another novel- *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is focussed on the nuptial relationship of *Adit* and *Sarah*. Their misadjustment with each other's cultures unveils the another face of Indian ethos. Both wedded couples are suffering from the problems of mutual adjustment because of their contrasting cultures. *Adit* is an *Indian*, but settled in *England*. He is living along with his betterhalf *Sarah*, an English woman. She fails to adjust with him and feels isolated from her own native culture after getting married with *Adit*. Migration of Indian to the west is a common thing today. *Anita Desai* has portrayed the real picture of immigrant sensibilities. This cultural shock between the two pushes them into alienation. *England* has given *Adit* economic freedom, his *English* wife and *British* citizenship, but his life lacks emotional attachment and feelings of love and respect.

In the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, she happens to portray another colour of real picture of Indian ethos. The two married couples *Raman* and *Sita* present a sharp contrast to the mythical *Ram* and *Sita* who are a symbol of the perfection of husband-wife relations, oneness, love, tolerance and sacrifice to every Indian. In this hard and tough materialistic world, neither *Sita* possesses the qualities of tolerance and compassion nor *Raman* has even the least time to share with his wife in her lamentation, frustration and separation. *Sita's* predicament and their matrimonial disharmony are clinically portrayed by the novelist:

..... she could not believe that he had really believed all was well, not knowing that she was bared, dull, unhappy, frantic, she could hardly believe that although they live so close together, he did not even know this basic fact of her existence (145).

Her next novel-*Fire on the Mountain*, unveils another picture of Indian ethos where the two married couples *Nanda Kaul* and *Raka* have to remain alienated and isolated because the milk of love, affection and respect is absent in their conjugal relationship.

This very briefly, it can be summed-up on the basis of the above discussion that the spark of social realism, spiritualism and Indian ethos is glittering in bright colours in her novels. As a harbinger of the contemporary *Indian English* fiction, she has beautifully exposed the hollowness, brutality and rudeness of the Indian society. She also communicates a message to all of us that a woman is not a puppet playing into the hands of her male partner. She has her self-esteem, love, honour and dignity. Gender-discrimination must be eradicated from the Indian society for building a healthy society and a healthy nation.

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