

Feminine Sensibility in the Novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract

Anita Desai is a modern indo-Anglian writer, widely recognized, not only in India but also in the world of fiction writing. She has emerged as the most significant novelist on the contemporary literary scene. The present paper aims to explore the feminine sensibility in the novels of Anita Desai. In her novels, the structure of the society is patriarchal where man is the controller of the sexual, economics, political and physical power. Desai very beautifully depicts in her novels the social predicament of women in India that life offers a very little choice to a woman who yearns for happiness. Her art of characterization is superb. Through her writings, she has given a voice to the unsung soul i.e; woman the beautiful creation of God.

Key words:- contemporary, sensibility, patriarchal, predicament etc.

Introduction

Post-Independence Indian English Fiction constitutes an important part of the world Literature today and women novelists have made important contributions to it. Anita Desai is a modern indo- English writer, widely acclaimed, not only in India but also in the world of fiction writing. She has studied a new dimension to the contemporary Indian English fiction. She is glorified with a remarkable and unique position due to her innovative thematic concerns and deals in her fiction with feminine sensibility. The novels of Anita Desai is relevant to all times because she writes about the predicament of modern man. Literature for Desai is the exploration and an inquiry of inner psyche. She unravels the mystery of the inner life of her characters. She writes mostly about the miserable plight of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands, fathers and brothers. Her female characters exist in the patriarchal society where they are unable to weave their own baskets. According to Gerda Lerner, patriarchy “means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power.” (Lerner, 239) Kate Millett has pointed out :

When a system of power is thoroughly in command it has scarcely a need to speak itself aloud. When its working is exposed and questioned it becomes not only subjected to discussion, but even to change.” (Millett, 58) The structure of the society presented in the novel is patriarchal and man is the controller of the sexual, economical, political and physical power. Her novels portray as how women are treated as second-rate citizens. Regarding the miserable condition of women, Sushila Singh quoted Simone de Beauvoir:

The situation of women is that she-a free and autonomous being like all creatures-nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of other.” (Singh 22) Anita Desai is superb in her treatment of feminine sensibility. In our country India where women have redesigned designation which does not permit any room for individualism, identity and assertions, Anita Desai

talks of women who question the age old traditions and want to seek individual growth. Her female protagonists try to discover the meaningfulness in life through the known, the established. Most of her protagonists are aloof ones. She portrays her characters as individuals. “facing single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence.” (The Times of India) Really, the characters in her novels are generally neurotics females, highly sensitive and engage with their dreams and imagination and thus entirely alienated from their harsh environment. In search of their identity and existence, her female protagonists embark on a long journey of contemplation.

In her first novel **‘Cry the Peacock’** Anita Desai discourse the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist. Desai tries to bring out the reasons of marital discord and also how it affects the family. She portrays the story of Maya who is haunted by a childhood prophecy of a fatal disorder. After the death of her mother and brother’s journey to America for his own independent destiny, she gets the most of her father’s love and affection. Having lived a carefree life under the indulgent attention of her loving father, she desires to have similar attention from her husband Gautama but fails. Maya and Gautama have strained relationship because of their incompatible temperament. Maya is sensitive, emotional and dreamy while Gautama insensitive, realistic and rational. Maya is poetic and highly imaginative. Gautama is philosophical, detached and remote. Maya has softness, warmth and tenderness while Gautama is hard and cold. The matrimonial bonds that binds the couple are very delicate, the growing tension between them reaches its climax when Maya kills Gautama and then commits suicide.

In her second novel, **‘Voices in the city’** Anita Desai probes the psychic compulsion that may affect an individual in forging long term and significant relationships and how an individual is affected if he is unable to forge such relationships. The novel is divided into four parts -Part I for Nirode, Part II for Manisha, Part III for Amla and Part IV for mother. It tells the story of a brother, two sisters and their mother. But throughout the novel, Nirode remains the dominant character. Nirode is obsessed with the relationship of his mother with major chadha and considers her a she cannibal. If Maya’s tragedy in **‘Cry the Peacock’** emanated from her obsession with a father figure, Nirode’s tragedy lies in his love-hate relationship with mother.

Moreover, the novel deals with the in compatible marriage of Monisha and Jiban. Monisha’s husband believes that a women’s most important roles besides child bearing are cooking, cutting vegetables, serving food and brushing small children’s hair under the authority of a stern mother-in-law. Monisha’s ill matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility and stress of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband push her to breaking point. The elements of love, trust and emotional understanding are missing in her life and finally she commits suicide. The novel leaves the message that a healthy compromise based on sacrifice of ego leads to success in married life.

Anita Desai’s fourth novel **‘Where shall We Go This Summer’?** Published in 1975 has been welcomed as “an interesting addition to Anita Desai’s achievement as an Indian novelist writing in English.” She presents her theme of probing into the consciousness of an introvert and sensitive women who is bored and frustrated by her commonplace and hum-drum life and tries to escape into purposeless and unproductive loneliness.

Structurally, this novel seems to have been inspired by Virginia Woolf's masterpiece 'To the Light house.' Throughout the novel, Desai makes an attempt to go deeper into the extraordinary inner life of its protagonist Sita.

Raman and Sita have irreconcilable temperaments and attitudes to life. Sita represents a universe of emotions, feminine sensibility while Raman is a man with an active view of life and practical compatibility. Sita is a nervous, sensitive middle aged- woman with explosive and emotional reactions to many things that happen to her. In this novel, the theme of alienation and lack of communication in married life is discussed by the writer. She remains an ignored personality. In this novel, Desai has painted a real and pathetic picture of a lonely married woman who aspires to triumph over the chaos and suffering of her rather unusual existence.

Anita Desai's fifth novel 'Fire on the Mountain' (1977) depicts the feminine sensibility and woman's ardent desire to understand herself in terms of not only her relationship with her family but also in terms of her individual identity and its relationship with the world at large. The novel paints the torment lives of female universe. How two women separately live under one roof to exist and yet appear not to exist.

'Fire on the Mountain' may be considered the story of the agonized cry of Nanda kaul, an old woman who longs for a quiet retired life. Nanda kaul and her husband do not have a warm marital bond. He is in illicit love affair with another woman. Nanda holds the position of a housekeeper only. Outwardly, the kauls are an ideal couple for university but from inside their relationship is all barren. Desai's female characters are the victim of mental and emotional torture. Nanda kaul's loneliness is illustrated by an extract from the Pillow Book of Sir Shonagon - "when a woman lives alone, her house should be extremely dilapidated...Since she treasures her solitude, she feels." In the novel 'Fire on the Mountain, fire is symbolic which burns in the heart of an old lady- Nanda kaul. It explores the alienation of Nanda kaul and her grand- daughter Raka. The isolation of both female characters have been presented in it. Nanda feels happy in the barrenness and enjoys in her own company. The following passage reveals the futility of her alienated life: "Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children- the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice. She lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication, they helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquilizers, pills."

Thus Anita Desai poses the hypothesis that the memories of the past are the most sensitive and enduring bonds. After marriage, her position is lost. The Cinderella of the Father becomes just a puppet in the hand of husband and other male figures. This patriarchal society snatches everything from her female characters Nanda and Raka pay heavy price for their sincerity and innocence. To sum up, it may be stated that Anita Desai presents to her readers the complex and puzzling network of human relationships as a big contemporary issue. Desai is a contemporary writer because she considers new themes and knows how to deal with them. Undoubtedly, she has added a new dimension to the Indian English fiction. She is interested in the psychic life of female universe. Her novels reveal that the real

concern is with the exploration of Female Sensibility. Through her writings, she has given a voice to the unsung soul i.e; woman, the beautiful creation of God.

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