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Anita Desai as a feminist: With reference to her novels

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Abstract

Anita Desai has gained distinction in exploring the human psyche and the emotional feelings of her protagonists. She is one of the best-known writers of Indian fiction in English. She has added a new dimensions and marvelous favor to the contemporary Indian English fiction and has a significant place due to her innovative thematic concerns and deals in her fiction with feminine sensibility Anita Desai examines the deep psyche of her characters, especially women characters. She is a keen observer of the society and the position of the women in the contemporary society draws her special attention. They are the explorations of the family problems, which perhaps is the chief cause behind the extravagant of the women from their family, all her novel describes the psychosomatic growth of a female character, which cannot cope up with the practical world. In Indian writing feminism has been used as a modest attempt for evaluating the real social scenario as far as women are concerned. This paper is an important insight in-to representation of feminism in the novels of Anita Desai, while exploring feminism in Indian Writings in English.

Keywords: Feminism, Alienation, Frustration, Psychosomatic, exploitation

Introduction

Anita Desai's work are totally from other Indian women writers in English: Narayan Seghal, Kamala Markanday and Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who mainly concern themselves with politics, East-West encounter and social theme. Desai is concerned with the psychic life of her characters. Since her childhood, Desai was conscious of being a writer. Writing is a part of her character, temperament, nature and life. She has added to her genius by learning from other writers. When she was nine years old, she first read *Wuthering Heights*. Although she could not understand half of it yet it was a thrill. The novelist remembers the experience: "It struck me with force of a gale and I still vibrate to it. Ever since; literature has seemed to me more interesting, more significant and overwhelming than the real world. Later, of course, other writers meant more to me. In my twenties when I first began to work seriously and consciously on my novels, it was D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Proust that influenced me more interestingly"

Anita Desai explains the interior landscape of the mind rather in the politics or socio-political realities. In the novels of Desai, she always describes the protagonists women and the sufferings of women in the male dominated society, who have reached different stages in life due to the conservatism of counterparties. Even the women in her novel are fragile introverts rapid in their own skills but these emotional dreams sometimes led to a violent death. Besides that central theme of her novels is the existential predicament of women as an individual. In each of her novel, one should sense a novelist eager for a way of living, which would respond to the inner most earning of the Indian women for self-emancipation and self dignity. As from the novels it has been found that Anita Desai is more interested in the exploration of female psyche dealing with thoughts, emotions and sensations at various levels of consciousness. Desai feels that besides having a creative genius, a novelist must be sensitive and have a power of keen observation so that he could give acute descriptions and "pick up tiny details that others might not notice". Besides sensitivity and observation, a rich experience and a good training are also. It is not imperative, however, that a writer has all kind of experience. For in a writer "lack of experience may be handicap, but lack of sensitivity, thought, intelligence of memory would be far greater one". Desai herself asserts that she has been influenced by European and American literature.

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In an interview she says: “Ruth Jhabvala always inspired and encouraged me although she did not help in any material sense, such as reading or editing my manuscripts.” Anita Desai first novel “Cry, The Peacock” 1963, Maya the chief female protagonist is obsessed almost from the very beginning of the novel with the 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 Gautama with the lack of emotional attachment is in contrast to her joy’s 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 her emotional and physical satisfaction other by his age. Further Maya’s sensuous thrills and excitement are dampened by the non-attachment philosophy of the “Bhagwat Gita”. Maya seeks communion of this 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. The novel is mainly concerned with disharmony between husband and wife relationship. There is a breakdown in communication and Maya gets isolated and detached. Maya kills Gautama and then commits suicide. She is imprisoned within the four walls of the house and remains isolated because there is no one to share her grief.

Alienation is one of the major problems confronting the postmodern man. The present era can be rightly called as “the era of alienation”. In the present era, alienation is due to the generation gap, loss of identity, fear, loss of credibility, isolation and so on. The novel the opened with the depiction of husband-wife alienation and discord by exploring the relationship of the prominent characters Maya and Gautama. The theme of alienation is the outcome of the hypersensitive nature of Desai’s female characters. In her novels stress is shifted from the external and the internal world. The protagonist Maya is obsessed with the fear of death as a consequences of an astrological prediction that one of the spouses will die in the fourth year of their marriage. She cannot establish any effective communication with her husband, Gautama, who is detached, rational and twice of her age. In the novel Maya receives hostility and in differences rather than delicacy and affection. In this novel Desai presents the silence, solitude, melancholy, and dark world of shadows in Maya’s life.

Desai in her second novel, “*Voices In the City*” (1965) depicts Indian society still in transition more than a decade after India’s independence from British rule. The novel is broken into four sections—the first three are named after a trio of young adult siblings – Nirode, Amla, and Anand Monisha from a Himalayan village who, separately and for different reasons, have moved to Calcutta. Amla sees the city as a monster, Nirode sacrifices everything for her carrier, and Monisha cannot bear her stifling existence in the household of a wealthy old Calcutta family. *The Voices In The city* has some of the poetic intensity and richness of her earlier novel, *Cry The Peacock*, husband-wife alienation does not form the crux of the story as in *Cry The Peacock*. The focus here is on human futility. Though Desai portrays female characters who subvert the patriarchal underpinnings of Indian society. The story is shown as glorifying the male character, Nirode as the protagonist and the female characters “do [es] not quite fit into the pattern”. However, in Desai’s *Voices in the City*, her deft portrayal of the

sensitive and keen understanding of the social, cultural, and material impediments faced by her female characters in their search for attainment cannot be denied. The novel can be effectively read as a political structure within a feminist context because it insistently questions and opposes the quintessential “feminine” ideal rooted in Hindu mythology. Whereas Monisha and Amla dismantle the old mythologies and iconic presentations of women as subservient, self-sacrificing, chaste and devoted to family, their mother Otima and beyond her the city of Calcutta, personify two of Desai’s strongest statements of female resistance to the traditional structures of patriarchy.

Desai’s art of feminism characterizations are superb but who are haunted by a peculiar acute concept and judgments of doom, withdraw themselves into an imaginative world of their own, get hysterical, neurotic, self-agitated and unhappy mood changed. A prick into the mystical crusts of the psychology of the female protagonists of Anita Desai upholds the universal emptiness, conventional alienation and solitude and an abysmal segregation from which they are victim of mental agony and pangs of tormenting psychology. Her feminist superb creations are adamant and eccentric towards the male dominated order and system. Femininity and womanhood are not bounded by social contracts. Her tale and novel are presented through the feminine sensibility and pragmatic sense. Desai aims to examine the natural, social and fanciful bonds that unchain the women’s issues and in this way she is concerned with the destiny of the house minded woman as impacted in her popular novels. Anita Desai pictures the glaring portrayal of the women’s quests by fostering out the profound and deeper universe of her powerful protagonist.

In Desai third novel, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, the action shifts to England. The main three characters are Dev, Adit and Sarah. All three characters are in conflict with their environment Sarah is an unstable wife, who finds herself playing two roles that of an Indian at home and that of a Britisher outside; all the while she questions who she really is Dev I the more cynical and aggressive of the two while Adit, though essentially the same is muted at the beginning. In her novel “*Where Shall We Go This Summer*” all of her pervasive themes return the neurotic heroine the dissatisfaction with the here and now the obsessive search for the meaning of existence. Sita is disgusted with her indifferent husband her meaningless life in their Bombay flat and her selfish, uncaring children her memory of an idyllic childhood with her father. She has to make a compromise after a false resolution. Sita is back where she began commenting that if she had been younger where she wrote the novel she might have ended it with Sita’s suicide, Desai has explained that her less melodramatic conclusion is more in keeping with the realities of middle age.

In all her other major works like *Fire on The Mountain*, *Clear Light Of Day*, *In Custody* and *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, she lays equal emphasis on the feminine characters and takes special interest in projecting the essential features that dominate their characters. In almost all these works, women, who are portrayed as the chief protagonists and who are depicted as suffering in a meticulous world dominated by men, who in the guise a father, a brother, a husband or a lover, presents a constant threat to their integrity, intuition, peace and happiness. These characters are painted in various colors and played varied roles starting from the role of housewives to that of enlightened

professionals and educational institutions; in each and every changing situation they have reacted sometimes violently and sometimes silently, unheard, unknown by others. The negative aspect of alienation is effectively brought to light by Desai. She uses the technique of psychologizing or seeing through to establish that there is a new self-concept emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. According to Desai it is the stratification of men above women in the patriarchal framework that contributes to the conflicts between man and woman. Her female characters with more than ordinary sensibility fight against the constraints placed on them. It is the lack of a strong identity that places women in these psychological roles-slots.

As a feminist writer Desai introduces the theme of women's freedom in her novels. Her young women characters yearn for freedom. But quite unfortunately none of her characters could free themselves from the bondage. Maya thinks, "I had not escaped. The years had caught up, and now the final, the decisive one held me in its perspiring clasp from which release seemed impossible" Monisha describes her plight: "Why am I so sad? Why am I so afraid?.....They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read misinterpret". Desai's women characters are always seen hypersensitive, lonely and helpless and they are tormented by the patriarchal domination. *Ogunyemi* says, "A feminist novel is not just one that deals with women and women's issues, but it should also posit some aspects of a feminist novels". Desai challenges the image of Indian women stereotypes, especially of the middle class. She presents their original pathetic situation with a longing for fulfillment in the family and society. Most of her women are housewives, but they are unhappy one way or the other. Desai thrusts a voice and desire into the being of these women.

Feminism is the ideology of women's liberation, and Anita Desai is awakened and conscious about women's life and problems. In an interview with *The Hindu*, Elfriede Jelinek, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 2004, when she was asked about her reaction on being addressed as a feminist writer, she comments: "As an intellectual woman, one can only be a feminist..... Of course. Feminism is a stereotype with which one demolishes all uncomfortable and unpleasant achievements of women". Desai's novels work through a feminine consciousness. She has by and large written about women characters. She exploits the situation of women's suffering in her novels to present problems that confront women in the male-dominated society. Anita Desai has dwelt upon problems of love, marriage and sex in her novels in a very convincing and realistic way. She seems to champion the view that marriage alone does not provide a ready-made solution to life's tension, chaos and turbulence. A proven and trusted sense of co-operation at every stage and phase is required.

Almost in all her novels of Anita Desai, she has always tried to convey the inner urges of her female protagonists through her writing and depiction of situation in a proper way that has echoed to all. These things have helped her to peep into the inner world of the women and delineated their reality in totality. She has always acted in her own way and attempted to express the feminism in her own way. She has contributed to the India with the feminist concern; the most important thing about her is the way of expression. She has

always covered the women of all age group and all types like children, old, intellectual, dull etc in her writings which has made her one of the great feminist writer of the times.

Conclusion

Finally, Anita Desai emerges as a well-established Indo-Anglian Novelist of Post-Independence era. Her contribution is considered as more significant in the development of Indian Novel in English. Most of her works deals with inner life which is crowded by psychological problems. Her characters are usually women who are haunted by a peculiar sense of doom, withdraw themselves into a sequestered world of their own, become neurotic, self destructive and unhappy. These women characters are too introverted to be able to cope with their personal circumstances and adjust themselves to life and meet its problem both courageously and adequately. Her portrayal of man-woman relationship is influenced and conditioned by complex social milieu. She basically portrays the plight of modern woman in the existing man dominated society where she makes an effort to voice herself. She portrays the disparity in temperament as affecting the man –woman relationship. Mostly women are culturally as well as emotionally dependent on man and any disruption in relationship proves to be a loss of self. The current case study on Anita Desai has perform a significant function of instilling a positive "Feminine" identity rather than a female identity. Her women characters undergo many sufferings inside and try to overcome from it and attain empowerment in their life. This focuses mainly on feminism. Desai uses visual details and an impressionistic style in an attempt to convey a sense of underlying meaning everybody affairs, manner and treatment. Her themes are original and she analyses human relationships in the context of emotionally related kin which is a fertile area for exploration.

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