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Representations of women in Anita Desai's novels

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Abstract

The history of Indian women writers begins with Toru Dutt and her unfinished novel *Bianca* or *The Young Spanish Maiden*. Other women novelists and their novels of the earth period are Raj Laxmi Debi's *The Hindu Wife* or *The Enchanted Fruit* (1876), Krupabai Sattinadhan's *Kamala*, *A Story of Hindu Life* (1894) and *Saguna*, *A Story of Native Christian Life* (1895). Then there are Shavantibai Nikumber's *A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Wife* (1896) and Calcutta Sorabjis works *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1901), *Sun babies: Studies in the Child Life of India* (1904) and *Between the Twilights* (1908).

Keywords: Anita Desai's novels, Indian women, Toru Dutt

Introduction

After the Second World War, women writers of quality enriched Indian fiction in English. The first name that has to be mentioned here is that of Kamala Markandeya who established herself as a great with *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). Her other novels are *Some Inner Fury* (1957), *A Silence of Desire* (1961), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Cofer Dams* (1969) etc. Nyantara Sehgal's novels are *A Time to be happy* (1957), *this Time of Morning* (1965), *A Storm in Chandigarh* (1965) etc. Vimala Rainas Ambapali came out in 1962 and Muriel Vasi's *Too High for Rivalry* in 1967. Among the third groups of novelists the first name is that of Nargis Dalai. Her novels are *Minari* (1967), *Sisters* (1973), *The Inner Door* (1975) and *The Girls from Overseas* (1979) etc. The term 'Feminism' was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas the younger in 1872 in a pamphlet 'L' Homme Femme. He used it to designate the then emerging movement for women's rights. Later it evolved into a cultural movement and spread all over the world to attain complete equality of women with men in all aspects Social, moral, legal, political, economic as well as educational. Feminist criticism questions male dominated view of life and discourses. In the beginning feminist critical writings were political in nature but of late the emphasis is on the female framework for the analysis of women's literature called 'gynocritics'.

In India it can be said that Gandhiji and Raja Ram Mohan Roy were responsible for changing the lifestyle of Indian Women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, with his social reforms and his efforts in the direction of emancipation of women and Gandhiji with his political movements for the freedom struggle brought women out of their houses and gave them equal importance.

Feminism has been a dominant on the vast number of women writing. Kamala Markandeya may be considered the first Indian Woman writer in English to deal with the position and problems of women in Indian society. To quote K.K. Sinha, "Kamala Das may perhaps be said to be the first voice of the women, by a woman" then, there appeared on the literary scene dozens of women writers showing concern for the continued marginalization and oppression of women. At the same time a writer Anita Desai has portrayed women who are unable to cope and who suffer or commit suicide because they are unable to cope up with their self-created problems. Anita Desai's works reveal the following day to day problems that affect the peace of modern man in general and women in particular. They are: gap between aspirations and achievements, conflicts between tradition and modernity, marital dis-coed, alienation, lack of adjustment, indifferent parents and lack of proper upbringing of children leading to serious psychological problems in later life, dowry as a social evil and preference for boys over girl child.

The novel, *Cry, The Peacock*, published in 1963, deals with a neurotic young woman Maya, who is obsessed with the childhood prophecy of the Albino and has a father fixation too. The Albino had predicted the death of either spouse in the fourth year of their marriage. The gruesome incident of Maya pushing her husband to death could have been averted, had she confided her apprehensions in someone or had she kept herself occupied with something or

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the other. Being motherless, Maya had become self centered and obsessed with her father because of his pampering. Her father had showered all his love and tried to create a fairyland in her mind where she is the princess. Her expectation that everybody else including her husband Gautama show the same concern for her is far fetched.

Maya's tragedy is that she has nothing to keep herself occupied. She doesn't even try to be busy and to divert her thoughts. Moreover, she doesn't have children to keep her distracted; her idle brain is responsible for her weird imagination and obsessions. Even if she visits friends and acquaintances, she does not enjoy or learn something, but torments herself and also worries her husband. Her husband Gautama, who happens to be her father's friend, is a very practical and sensible person. His approach to life is down to earth. Even after the tragic death of her son, when Maya herself confesses of what she had done and when servants start circulating information that it was a murder and not an accident, she calls it an accident and doesn't castigate Maya. The projection of such a mother in law is indeed praiseworthy as it is in contrast to the stereotype mothers in law who are supposed to be cruel and tyrannical.

Anita Desai seems to have selected the names of Maya and Gautama deliberately to denote their characteristic traits and there by reveal their contrariness. Maya means illusion and it can be stretched to include love of beauty and bounty found around and an attachment to life whereas Gautama the namesake of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism stands for practical and deep knowledge and detachment. As both of them are contradictory in nature there cannot be real harmony.

Anita Desai's next novel 'Voices in the City' is symbolic of violence in the city. It is indicative of the overpowering influence of the destructive and oppressive city of Calcutta on its equally depressed and suffering characters. The characters Nirode, Monisha and Amla search for freedom and peace in their own ways and fail. Only Amla rises above the other two after realizing how and why they failed. She overcomes the existential problems and seeks positive solutions. Nirode and Monisha seem to be just trapped with chances of escaping. Monisha is a victim of circumstances and her own sensitivity. Her marriage in to a middle class joint family in which she remains a total stranger and where lack of privacy and other such disturbing situations drive her to take the extreme step. The oppressive city of Calcutta and her exposed life in the family depress her to a large extent. Her anguished and alienated self-discerns the underlying difference between her and her husband's complacent family. Monisha's husband, Jiban is totally devoted to his family and doesn't have the will or the capacity to make Monisha feel comfortable or wanted. They do not share an emotional relationship. The expression 'Jiban remains sitting with us, but Jiban is never with us at all' reveals the lack of communication and warm feelings. Her childishness becomes a subject of derision and the ladies of Jiban's family, instead of sympathizing with her or remaining quiet, talk of her incapacity and discuss her organs in a very shabby manner. They treat her with suspicion as well. She is hurt very badly by their indecent behavior and finds them unrefined.

Monisha had been brought up in a family which did not suffer from middle class syndrome. She is highly educated and accomplished. Her library, consisting of classics of

different languages is a treasure trove for her but she doesn't have the time to read and enjoy.

The agony of a life of exposure is explicitly conveyed in her diary. It is obvious that Monisha is afraid of involvements. She maintains a distance and likes to observe rather than participate though she is close to her brother Nirode, and tries to understand him and tends to him in his sickness. Her suicide is a symbolic gesture showing that death is preferable to a trivial lowly existence.

Monisha's death gives rise to different reactions from Nirode and Amla. Nirode exclaims: "Monisha dead. I am sentenced to death, too, now. I am prepared and waiting for it. I have heard her approach- death, Kali. She watches me all time now, Amla, while she watches I grow more and more vividly alive by the minute, and also closer and closer to my death. I am so stretched so open to this vision. I can feel it seep into me, like night turning my blood black (256). Nirode had always been negative, cynical and lacked the emotion of love, prone to withdrawal unlike Amla. He is an artist and can, if he so desires, achieve wonders. Though Nirode had been very affectionate towards his mother in his childhood, and had disliked his father, he turns against his mother after his father's death. He suspects that his mother is deeply involved with Major Chadda. He imagines all sorts of nauseating things regarding his mother's relationship with Major Chadda. Amla unlike her brother and sister who are extremely sensitive and self-destructive is balanced and is even capable of love. She is smitten by Nirode's friend and painter Dharma. Just as *Cry, The Peacock* and *Voices in the City* show that excessive parental care or indifference causes psychic imbalances in the children, where shall *We Go This Summer?* Also continues with that perspective. Sita, the protagonist of the novel in her forties and expecting her fifth child, decides to retain the child in her womb and not give birth to it. This shocks and exasperates her husband Raman, who tries to reason out with her and fails. She decides to go to Manori an island where she spent her childhood, to fulfill her wish. She had come here in order not to give birth. An explanation she had repeated to herself and her husband so often that, instead of acquiring lucidity.

Anita Desai, who specializes in depicting the inner world of the characters, employs images and symbols to convey the diverse states of mind, fixations, phobias, friction and loneliness of the major characters in her novels. Her language is poetic and her novels are full of natural scenes.

Tragedy and relationships in the novel 'The Cry of the Peacock'

A very popular novel by Anita Desai, *The Cry of the Peacock* (1963), explores the unique female sensibility of 'Maya', a motherless child who was parented only by her father. Thus the character has a very close relationship with the father. Her childhood remains happy but unnatural as she realised in retrospect after her marriage to Gautama. Her marriage makes her life increasingly restrictive, and Maya feels lonely and powerless in her marriage, exacerbated by her economic dependence on her husband.

Eternally torn between her loneliness and fear of society, Maya kills Gautama and commits suicide. The story deals with not just the external but also the internal stresses of the women's life. Her lonesome marriage to Gautama, who was double her age, rational and detached, adds to her world of silence filled with melancholy (Vashisth).

Isolation and rebellion in 'The Voices of the City' novel by Anita Desai

In another novel, *The Voices of the City* (1965), where three siblings Nirodha, Amla, and Monisha take the centre stage. While Nirodha remains the protagonist, Amla and Monisha are presented as two contrasts. Monisha is married to Jiban, a moralist who asks for more friendliness from her towards his family. Monisha's longing for privacy makes her nostalgic for her childhood but also pushes her towards isolation.

Monisha leads a subservient life dedicated to Jiban and his joint family, and consequently, she is made aware of the meaninglessness of her existence. The breaking point comes when she is accused of stealing money for her brother's medical expenses. Heartbroken and disillusioned, she lights herself on fire.

Monisha's sister Amla, is presented as a foil. She is a rebellious woman who goes against societal norms. Her short-lived infatuation with Dharma proves to be a short relief, as she still experiences an intense urge to communicate, making her consciousness profoundly feminine (RANI).

Battling patriarchy and finding purpose in Anita Desai's novel 'Fasting, Feasting'

In the novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), Desai breaks the novel into two parts. The first deals with the spinster Uma, who is stuck living with her parents and is fasting. The second half deals with the boy Arun, who is sent abroad to America to study and is feasting. Uma's life is bound strictly within the confine of her father's house, taking precedence over her own. Her feelings and needs are always secondary and often ignored. Her mother plays the part of the enforcing patriarch. She is viewed as ugly and undesirable by all, including her parents and potential suitors for marriage.

Uma's pilgrimage with Mira-Masi opened her up to the desires she had pushed down into her unconscious. The thoughts she would have in her room when her parents were out of the house. She becomes increasingly conflicted about her existence and the paths she should take in life. Arun reaches a position of women's condition from the outside as he is constantly forced to go out and get the best the world has to offer. While Uma reaches her desires from the confinements of solid traditional familial bonds (VOLNÁ).

Submission and rebellion of women in Clear Light of the Day: Anita Desai's *Clear Light of the Day* (1980) envisions two kinds of women, one who submits and carries tradition and the other is the new-age woman who is rebellious and resists the impositions of society. The novel's protagonist, Bim, is a strong woman who is independent. She becomes financially independent and puts herself through the education of history.

The twist occurs at the loss of her parents when the clear-headed Bim is contrasted to her sister Tara who chooses to escape from her marriage. Bim doesn't falter and educates her brothers and sisters and marries them. She remains an unmarried literate woman who teaches history, and all luxuries she can afford are buying books to read.

Another character, Mira-Masi, is also shown as the old woman who encircles herself with her husband and her children to escape the harsher realities. Bim finds her life detestable and pitiful (Singh). Thus, Desai's concept of the

new woman, not an ideal or best woman, is based on the woman's desire to preserve her agency and act against the societal forces that work to bind her to traditional norms.

The novels by Anita Desai portray feminism as a hidden note:

Writing is a process of discovering the truth that is nine-tenth of the iceberg, that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality. Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things.

Conclusion

Anita Desai's works reflect the women's psyche, which is often absent from the literature. In a review of one of Amitav Ghosh's books, she criticized him for confining women's experiences to the outer worlds. This phenomenon isn't exceedingly common, especially in South Asian literary cultures. Desai's works often end in tragedies reflecting their tragic existence.

The novels by Anita Desai portray women stuck in a man's world with helplessness and frustration born out of silence. This subservient existence where her perspectives often remain unsaid and unexplained. Desai's feminine sensibility explores their areas of womanhood and femininity in detail and has started a feminist discourse that is distinctly Indian.

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