

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## MAN WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN ANITA DESAI'S IN CUSTODY : A THEMATIC EVALUATION

Dr. S. LATHA RANI

Assistant Professor, Department of English, N.M.S.S. Vellaichamy Nadar College, Nagamalai, Madurai, Tamilnadu, India



### ABSTRACT

As love is the foundation on which human existence rests, almost all the great writers have dealt with the theme of love and its harmonizing power, for love is the basic need of human life without which human existence becomes soulless, dry and even mechanical. This paper examines how Anita Desai has dwelt upon the problem of love, sex and marriage in her own way and holds the view rather authentically that marriage alone does not provide a solution to life's tension and chaos, for mental satisfaction and happy married life means better understanding between husband and wife coupled with whole hearted emotion and deep love, paving the way for psychological adjustment which is a key to healthy compromise and meaningful adjustment in a married life. In Desai's *In Custody*, the problem of involvement versus detachment, of surrender versus freedom is variously interpreted. Ultimately, it becomes obvious that love and marriage is the fundamental problems of human existence.

**Key Words:** Affection, fondness, attachment, passion, devotion, biological instinct, marital disharmony

©KY PUBLICATIONS

### INTRODUCTION

The idea of love, in one form or another, nourishes the definition and development of almost every human culture in the history of the world—past and present, east and west, primitive and complex. Love has been a motivational force in shaping the culture both the theological and behavioural dimensions of life and a substantive theme in the byproducts of almost every form of human activity: "in religion, arts, literature, music, dance, drama, philosophy and psychology"<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, wise to admit that the idea of love has left a wider and more indelible imprint upon the development of human culture in all its aspects than any other single notion.

Tilehard in his *The Phenomenon of Man* says<sup>2</sup>, "Love alone is capable of uniting living beings in such

a way as to complete and fulfill them, for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves." Love has been the binding power that has provided the various types of human groupings (family, clan, tribe, state and nation) that form the basis for social coherence, familial ties and collective experience. Love in general means attachment between lovers, attachment between parents and children, attachment husband and wife, attachment between friends and also between strangers or even unknown persons. The term 'love' also connotes physical, sexual, emotional, intellectual and also spiritual affinity. The synonyms for the term 'love' in English are: affection, liking, fondness, passion, attachment and devotion. "When viewed in its quintessence, love may be even identified as the

invisible power behind the green fuse that drives the flower, the 'vital impulse' or 'the within of things... the internal propensity to unite' the under grids and nourish the entire biosphere"<sup>3</sup>

Love is, no doubt, the central force behind life, for it brings together man and women not only through affection and marital relationship but also through sexual attachment. New generations come into being because of love and sex. So 'love' in this sense is 'a welcome passion'. Normally love springs up without any expectation, without any condition. It goes beyond worldly desires, for it is beyond greed, jealousy and ambition. It is simply a tender emotion because it purifies the being and also brings in joy and fulfillment in terms of sexual, marital and even life experiences. As it is the primal force of marriage and life, it sounds as an important theme in literature.

Love has always been the dominant theme for writers of literature. It has always been considered a general theme in word literature and creative artists have always pondered over the idea or portraying love in their literary works. Defining love, Bertrand Russell remarks: "love, when the world is properly used, does not denote any and every relation between the sexes but only one involving considerable emotion, and a relation which is psychological as well as physical".<sup>4</sup> Love has two important meanings i.e., love the pure (spiritual) and the simple and sexual love coupled with loving kindness. Plato distinguished them with exactness by ascribing the exaltation, the sense of power and the feeling of heightened vitality. Which accompany sexual love to other love which we prefer to call loving-kindness and by doing so, infected it with the ineradicable vice if earthly love: love passes and dies. The great tragedy of life is not that men perish, but that men cease to love. Love comes before marriage and also comes after marriage: Sex plays a pivotal role in mutual, emotional and physical love experiences felt and experience both before and after marriage. It is generally held that there should not be any literature without the theme of love, for "the passion of love between the sexes is the most universal and normal of all passion..."<sup>5</sup> So love is nothing but an itching of the heart that cannot be easily scratched. This definition invariably conveys

the message that love is an experience with various reactions for who are in love. Marriage is also deeply rooted in the basic need of the family. Marriage seems to be a bridge for husband and wife. Sex is also not less important in life. No doubt, love, sex and marriage are contemporary to each other and without sex, married life is not supposed to be 'a happy one'. Thus, marriage is a social recognition of sex between two persons.

Love before marriage is totally different from love after marriage because before marriage, there is only love in terms of mere emotional attachment but after marriage, duties, responsibilities, ego, family ties, social commitments – all become part and parcel of human life and love gets step and step changed into anger, irritation, hatred etc., leading to marital disharmony, personal enmity and emotional displeasure. Every society has its own problems of love, sex and marriage. Anita Desai's novels do obviously deal with the problems of love, sex and marriage which can be even considered as the chief theme of her novels. Through the excellent portrayal of Indian Characters, Mrs. Desai presents her powerful themes by pointing to the relationship of love, sex and marriage between husband and wife.

What sounds significant is that Anita Desai has dwelt upon the problem of love, marriage and sex in her own way. She is of the opinion that marriage alone does not provide solution to life's tension and chaos. 'Mental Satisfaction and happy married life' means better understanding and mutual love between husband and wife. For a healthy marital relationship, one needs the help of the other and a sense of co-operation is needed at all levels possible in life. Psychological adjustment coupled with emotional attachment and sexual relationship is a key to healthy compromise in a married life. From the very ancient times, marriage has got rooted in the basic need of the family and at the same time it is considered an essential element for the effective maintaining of a family. According to the Hindu tradition, marriage is regarded as a 'Samskara' which initially transformed everyman into a 'husband' and every woman into a 'wife', thus giving each a social role and finally uniting them into an eternal bond of love, procreation and self – realization. Marriage has been shown in all works of

art and literature as a bridge between husband and wife. Both love and marriage seek the aid of 'sex' for a meaning in life.

The very common notion is that marriage is always viewed as something more serious than the pleasure and enjoyment of two persons in each other's company. Love leads one to many directions, to nobler deeds and occasionally even heinous crimes. Many problems are found to be created by both husband and wife and their dear and near ones in marriage and married life. Generally speaking, love – marriages are neither accepted nor approved by the Indian Society which takes them as nothing but 'crimes'. That is why such dangerous steps as suicide, divorce and murder are taken by men and women either before marriage or after marriage and sometimes they are forced to do so. Sometimes disappointment in love makes some men and women remain unmarried throughout their life and some people are found going to the extent of taking as ascetic life because of 'love-failure'. Even the great painters, philosophers, great conquerors, great writers and even great actors generally get disappointed in their love affair before and after marriage. The commonly accepted and best way to be happy in married life lies in the words that follow: "Don't be too exacting, don't expect too much and take life as it comes".<sup>6</sup>

In the words of one modern critic Vinay Dubey, Love is an experience with various reactions on those who are in love. It plays role of mediator between mother and son, lover and beloved, husband and wife. It should be under any circumstances without any complexities. Love has two aspects – Subjective and Objective. Subjective love is something conscious and imaginative depending on individual point of view, but the objective love is the essence of love which is unconscious and spontaneous. In Indian civilization and society, love is found to be a closer inter – dependence of man and woman in terms of relationships and mutual ties, projecting itself as the supreme confirmation of the universality, immortality and infinitude of the self. Every society has its own problem of love and marriage. Being natural and the most powerful and unifying force in

men, love has made human existence possible and meaningful.

Marriage, being a social institution, is some sort of partnership between husband and wife the necessity of which is for the building of the structure of the society. Being the social recognition of the relation between man and woman, economic relationship, mutual understanding and love are the foundation of the institution of marriage; love and sex are very often combined. But after marriage, love should take the primary place so that the partnership shall remain intact. As love is the foundation on which human existence rests, almost all the great writers have dealt with the theme of love and its harmonizing power, for love is the basic need of human life without which human existence becomes soulless, dry and even mechanical. The fictional world of Anita Desai is "a world where the central harmony is aspired to but not arrived at and the desire to love and live clashes at times violently with the desire to withdraw and achieve harmony. In her novels, there is a striving, there is a need to beloved: Maya, Monisha, Sita almost all of them – desire this above all else, but they also resist, surrender and involvement."<sup>7</sup> In her novels, the problem of involvement versus detachment, of surrender versus freedom is variously interpreted. Ultimately, it becomes obvious that love and marriage are the fundamental problems of human existence.

Marriage, the oldest institution in the world, has been one of the major expressions of human career. "It is based on biological instinct in man and nature's urge for production. It begins with earliest man and woman"<sup>8</sup> Basically everything about marriage and above all romantic – marriage will continue to fascinate every mind for times to come."<sup>9</sup> Marriage is often controlled by tradition and custom. It is universally acknowledged that marriages in every country are ceremonized through religious authority, sometimes by social reformers and legislators. But India remains disunited in marriage customs and rites. This aspect of the Indian life helps one to study the marriage and marriage customs through the ages. There is no denying the fact that most vital factors in marriage are love and beauty, nearness, contact and mutual admiration

and contact. It may be said that in Hindu marriage, fortunately the sastric ideals are not universally observed and mutual admiration and reciprocal sentiments have not become extinct in India."<sup>10</sup>

Anita Desai, one of the most distinguished among the younger set of Indo – English writes, does not like to separate art from life and always them as a part of one pattern drawing upon each other for their existence. In every circumstance, and in each and every walk of life, she is known for presenting powerful characters with full enthusiasm and encouragement. Sensitiveness is considered the main characteristic in all her famous novels. "Anita Desai, as Vinay Dubey has put it, excels in depicting the pathetic pictures of a lovely married Indian woman who aspires to triumph over the chaos and suffering of her rather unusual existence. She writes that the life of women in India is slow and empty but on the other hand, in the West it is hurried, busy and crowded. Hence in her sense, both types of lives in the East and West cannot give full satisfaction to the heart of woman."<sup>11</sup> The idea of marriage differs in every country and every society, because it is conditioned by time and place. Now - a - days marriage is defined as "social behaviour patterns between individuals."<sup>12</sup> In her novels, Anita Desai skillfully depicts the inner imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology.

In the novel, *In Custody*, Anita Desai presents the thematic problem of love and marriage in a very exquisite manner by analyzing the problem of Deven Sharma, an impoverished college lecturer. In this world of 'sick, hurry and divided aims' he has to face the common problems others do. After his marriage with a sullen and dull wife, Deven Sharma finds a way to escape from the meanness and helplessness of his daily life. In spite of being a temporary lecturer in a private college, he is lost in the dreamy world of fantastic fame and name that one day or other he will rise to the pinnacle of his glory by means of his devotion to art and Urdu poetry. His extreme devotion to art and poetry leads him to the indifference to his wife and makes him develop some aversion towards married life. In this machine – driven age, Deven has cultivated an

aversion to and dislike for his wife. Like Zola, he lets his wife feel widowed. Here the novelist deals with a purely marital problem of this materialistic world of glittering civilization in a pent – up city like Delhi where people have little time to stand and stare. It so happens that in a metropolitan city like Delhi the relationship between husband and wife is always under strain because of the undue indulgence of the husband in extracurricular activities and his attachment with other women.

It is generally held that a husband, who is indifferent to his wife, shows much more concern to other women. Deven Sharma too becomes perturbed to hear the illness of Intiazbegum. Nur, for her treatment, wishes to admit her in a hospital but she refuses her hospitalization due to illness because she feels that she will be deprived of the affectionate nursing from her husband. Knowing all these feeling from her heart, Nur like a gentle conscience murmurs to himself very patiently, "I would nurse her myself" (CUS 113). It seems that such a feeling symbolizes his depth of love for his wife Begum. In the meanwhile Deven comes and stands speechless. He fails to narrate the story of his owing to the illness of Nur's wife. Suddenly Intiazbegum studies the situation and knowing the unfathomable love flowing in her husband's heart, she begins to weep and wets her cheek. At such a moving sight and pitiable condition of his wife, Nur's heart breaks into emotional excitement. He tries to calm down the overflowing emotions of her heart and consoles her, "Please calm yourself, please don't think such thing, and please life still – you are ill" (CUS 122)

As contrasted with this enormous attachment of a husband to his wife, Deven Sharma's infatuation is shallow and inspired by under Urdu poetry. In this mental agony, he looks before and after and pines for what is not. He wanders in search of money only. As her husband plans an Utopian scheme living through pinched lips: "You have no imagination, only going to Delhi to enjoy yourself there is money" (CUS 130). Such a self-centred life is led by a number of husbands who think of others, love others, have affectionate ties with them but they maintain a distance from their wife and children. Mrs. Desai deals with such

common problem of post – marital life in this novel *In Custody*. It is true that in cities like Delhi, Deven Sharma leads a very cultured life of a college lecturer grooming under the crushing agonies of poverty. He often feels as if his marriage has stood behind his imagination like a heavy weight. He also knows that marriage has clogged his progress in life. It has placed him in a cage from where it is impossible to escape. There is no way to get rid of it. As it is a common thinking of the impoverished husband, he feels dejected in life. But he finds consolation in the warm welcome of Mr. Siddiqui, when Siddiqui meets him with an open arm and gives a cordial welcome with these words of appreciation, “what an honour, what a pleasure, what an occasion, please come up, come up” (CUS 133). These consolatory words make Deven think about Siddiqui and his family. But Alas! There was none except cloth, his servant and his companion. Here it is reasonable to think that Deven’s heart is moved to pity at the pitiable condition of Siddiqui’s family and he is also attached with Nur’s wife and moved and moved by her illness. Being devoted to art and poetry, he is possessed by his poetic vision and he follows the religion of Urdu poetry. It is also relevant to think that because of his constant reading of Urdu poetry and Islam, Deven’s mind is inclined to marry more than one wife, ever and above he keeps himself aloof from his wife Sarala. If he had shown his love and affection towards his own family, his wife and son, he would have led a happy and contented life full of satisfaction and peace. As a matter of fact, the husband of his heart is never true to his wife in the real sense of the term. In his relation with his wife, there is something wanting. It may be said that it is the lack of harmony, adjustment and concurrence. A wife needs love and affection and nothing else, even from her husband and money can never quench her love-thirsty heart. She needs only sympathy, consolation, appreciation of her work, sharing of pains and pleasures and healthy mutual love and understanding.

In this modern lunatic world what is generally missing is the real feelings of love and affection in the married life physical love and lusty relation or healthy sexual relationship do not satisfy

a woman till she discovers the depth of spiritual love in the heart of her husband. Nowadays, in the machine packed age of ‘weariness, fever and fret’, the healthy marital relation between husband and his wife. This problem of love and marriage is dealt with in detail by Anita Desai in her novel *In Custody*. Marriage is a means to combine two souls. It is a ceremonious bond to the two bodies into spiritual harmony. But this truth does not seem to be true in the novels of Mrs. Desai. Under the complicate situation, Deven’s married life does not yield better and sweeter results. His “plain, penny – pinching and congenitally pessimistic” wife presents the picture of an abandoned wife” (CUS 67). In her company, Deven feels suffocation and is pained to notice the bad aspect of his married life. Complicated problems of married life settle upon him like a grey monster. He feels aged and haunted. He does not understand his wife and her motives and intentions. But he thinks that she does not care for him and his feelings. Both felt humiliated and insulted living in one room. Only at the end of the novel, Deven admits that his wife’s untidiness, her shabbiness and sullen expression were all the results of his own misdoing and that ‘it was all a part of his own humiliation’. All her aspirations were neglected. Everyday neglects her company. That is why she feels embittered. Deven understands her disappointment “because like her, he had been defeated too: like her, he was a victim of circumstances” (CUS 68).

Deven here in this novel *In Custody* is pictured as one seeking to reach out into the wider world in the hope of self – fulfillment. He undergoes experiences of various shades and complexities and eventually emerges as a wiser man with a more complete knowledge of being in this world. During the period of undergoing shades of various experiences, he suffers from the problem of marital dissonance. Deven’s wife Sarla’s dreams about marriage are dashed after the marriage with a low salaried lecturer. Like Deven, Sarla also becomes a victim in her married life, for her high expectations about married life are dashed after the marriage:

“[Sarala] dreamt the magazine dream of marriage, herself, stopping out of a car with a plastic shopping bag full of groceries and

filling them into the gleaming refrigerator, then rushing to the telephone placed on a lace oily upon a three legged table and excitedly ringing up her friends to invite them to see a picture show with her and her husband who was beaming at her from behind a flowered curtain (CUS 68)

Deven feels inferior owing to his diffused sense of failure. Overtly, his irritability with Sarla appears to be the outcome of his hurt male – ego. Deep down, his rage is, in a way, an externalization of self – hate, born out of an unconscious self – accusation. He reproaches himself for his inadequacy to make his distinction in life”... all he could measure up to was this-this shabby house, its dirty corners, its wretchedness and livelessness” (CUS 67). Deven leads “the life of a victim, a victim of the ordinary married life. Whenever he sees Sarla, he is reminded of a victim figure. Tired of pursuing such a life of victimization, Deven lies low and remains invisible. He exists in an invisible cell on the margin of life”.<sup>39</sup> FOR Deven, the country – side between Mirpore and Delhi “turned into no man’s land that lies around a prison, threatening in its desolation” (CUS 24). Real life is lost to Deven, for he leads a life of defeat and failure and his aspirations remain unfulfilled.

While Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Monisha in *Voices in the City*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* and Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* suffer on account of marital dissonance in a man – dominated word, Sarla of *In Custody*, finds her satisfaction under the care and guidance of her husband, Deven. But Deven is himself a helpless person. He understands the problems of his wife but h cannot sort out them due to his own inadequacies in terms of tact and worldly wisdom. Sarla is a victim of her husband’s weakness and helplessness. J.P.Tripathi remarks that” Sarla is the typical Hindu wife, simple, timid, obscure, domineered, undemanding and co – operative”.<sup>40</sup> Their marital life is disturbed and married by indifference and impassivity due to Deven’s stupidity. The first and foremost is that Deven is not financially sound and he fails to provide basic requirements to the family and things needed by his wife and son. Secondly, as he is brought up in a systematic environment, he

wants to adhere to principles and morals. His love of Urdu poetry and his obsession with name and fame neglect his wife. Commenting on this aspect of the problem, Anita Desai observes:

At least Deven had his poetry, she had nothing and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look (CUS )

### Conclusion

The hearts of Deven and Sarla are filled with agony and unfulfilled desires but nobility lies in them as they never complain seriously or grumble despite many hurdles. There is marital dissonance between them and also a sense of feeling for co–existence to avoid the breakage of sacred marital lies. Sarla observes that Deven feels like a trapped animal. In her eyes, Deven is not paying due attention to his married life. As a result, Sarla experiences terrible dissatisfaction in the married life. As a husband, Deven has provided basic things but not the desired things. Sarla wants to lead a harmonious married life. But poor Deven is busy with recordings and frequent visits to Delhi to meet Nur for the publication of articles in Murad’s magazine *Awaaz*. Sarla wanted Deven to be the custodian of her family. But unfortunately, he pays little care to his marital life. This is the reason for the absence of love in married life and subsequent tragedy in life.

### Work cited

- Benjamin, Jessica. “The Bond of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination”, Hester Einstein and Jardine (Ed). The Future of Difference. Boston: Mass, 1980.
- Bhatnagar. P, “The Theme of Man-Woman Relationship in the Novels of Anita Desai”, Indian Women Novelist, set-1, vol- ii, (Ed) R.K. Davan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991
- Dubey, Vinay, A Study of Love, Sex and Marriage in Anita Desai’s Novels. Bareilly: Vardan Press, 2010.
- Friedan, Betty. It Changed My Life. New York: Random House, 1976
- Gupta, Shiv Kumar. Preface to Marriage Among the Anglo Indians. Lucknow: Ethnographic folk culture society. 1969.
- Juliet, Mitchel. Women’s Estate New York: Vintage Books, 1924.
- Pillai. G.K, Introduction of Love, Beauty and Marriage. Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 1962