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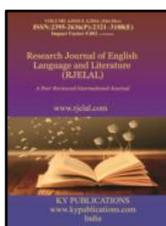
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CONFLICT IN RELATIONSHIPS IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai occupies a unique position among the contemporary Indian writers in English. She breaks free the clutches that were binding the older generation writers of her country like R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Kamala Markandaya. She can be easily compared to her European counterparts like Virginia Woolf, D.H.Lawrence and Henry James and the modernist tradition they represent. By her ability to encompass more universal and contemporary themes Desai has enriched the Indo-Anglican tradition and brought into the main line of contemporary fiction. She explores the complexity of the man-woman relationship in her novels, particularly in the context of the industrialized urban life which makes its own demands on the individuals. Incompatibility between man and woman is a predominant theme in her novels. She portrays men, be they husbands, fathers or brothers, as quite insensitive to the emotional, psychological and physical needs of women. An analysis of her novels shows that Anita Desai's vision is growth oriented. In some ways her novels can also be called as novels of rebirth and transformation. Her protagonists are rather circumscribed creatures that face the socio-economic pressures and traditional role expectations, which work against their independence and happiness. In spite of the failure of Desai's female protagonists to establish their independence and identity, Desai never ends her novels in a note of despair.

A Quest for Wholeness

The female protagonists of Anita Desai's novels are often engaged in a quest for 'Wholeness' and 'identity'. The quest is an act of defiance in both Sita and Nanda Kaul, the heroines of her novels *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Fire on the Mountain*. It is the dynamic energy of these two heroines, of their feminine sensibility, that leads them to escape into a free world. They attempt to understand themselves, their hidden selves, either through the process of expiation or re-examination. They wish to redefine their roles and identities in relation to their husbands, children and family members, their past, particularly *Patriarchy* in order

to reconstitute their wholeness. The heroines through a series of adventures in the outside world attempt to escape from the claustrophobic environment of domesticity and routine. Only such journeys provide them with an opportunity to re-examine their relationship with the other and also the limitations of the woman in general. In both these novels the heroines achieve a rare growth and understanding of life towards the end. In case of Nanda Kaul, this moment of truth and self recognition coincides with her death. Several critics have pointed out that there is a commonality in all her heroines and that they are interchangeable. Sita is an older version of Maya and Nanda Kaul an older

Sita placed in a different set of environment. The common quality among the heroines of Anita Desai is they are disillusioned with the existing milieu and they feel the urge to break away from the limitations created by the patriarchal society.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* the central situation lies, as it always does in Desai's novels, in the failed marriage of the heroine Sita. She has been married to Raman, reminding one of the mythic Rama of the epic *Ramayana*, for twenty years and they have four children. At the time of her expected fifth child she feels the strain of bringing forth another child into the bestial urban world of metropolitan Bombay. The existing violence coupled with the meaningless inanity and boredom of civilized urban life makes her restless and miserable. It is true that her home provides her with 'solidity and security', but it is only the meaningless 'solidity of streets and security of houses'. She feels that even her children partake of this unthinking destruction quite naturally and appear to enjoy it. Alienated, she avoids all social contacts with the outside world. In a world filled with violence she feels that the creative impulse has no chance against the powering desire to destroy. She withdraws from all human interaction because she does not wish to give her silent support to such life. Mere survival in a world which appears to have no meaning spells only void, fragmentation and nothingness to her. Sita's journey to Manori is based on the somewhat whimsical notion of protecting her foetus from birth and thereby sparing her unborn child of eventual happiness and despair. She hopes that Manori, her father's island of 'magic and miracles', may help her achieve this miracle of not giving birth. Though she has rejected all the relationships while heading towards Manori, her maternal instinct never lets her down as she takes her children Menaka and Karan with her too which redefines the 'wholeness' in her character.

Escape from Reality

The conflict between the need to withdraw in order to preserve one's wholeness and the need to be involved in the process of life, in order to fulfil one's responsibilities is continued in *Fire on the Mountain*. This oscillation between the attachment and detachment of the heroines of Desai shows only

their desperate search to find meaning in life and thereby achieve the wholeness. Nanda Kaul is another prototype Desai heroine who lives in Carignano, after her retirement and after her very active life as the wife of the late vice- chancellor. She has successfully completed her duties to her large family admirably. Her range of responsibilities had been large, that claimed her time and person, unending. After the death of her husband and settlement of her children she chose Carignano to spend the remainder of her life. She was impressed by the calm and silence of the place lacking human involvements, including her friends and family members. Carignano is similar to but different from Sita's dream island of Manori. Whereas Sita seeks an escape from responsibility and domesticity, Nanda Kaul feels that she has earned the right, in worldly terms, for "sanyas' or renunciation from life.

Bim in *Clear Light of Day* is said to be, in many ways, Desai's most mature and most integrated heroine, in so far that she successfully affirms life towards the end of *Clear Light of Day* to a degree unknown among her predecessors. There is a steady and perceptible ascent in the level of self-realization of the feminine sensibility from Desai's earliest female protagonist Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* to Bim. The heroine of the novel *Clear Light of Day* exhibits great clarity of perception. Even her extreme anger and bitterness towards her family are gradually replaced by feelings of love and oneness with them. The novel explores the thin line that divides exploitation of feminine self by their family and society and the individual's genuine willingness to share her feelings with others.

Like Nanda Kaul, Bim feels exploited. she feels that the family around whom she had centered her life, Tara and Raja, selfishly deserted her to fulfil their individual destinies elsewhere, leaving her to find for Mira Masi and Baba who become lifelong dependent on her. Bim's choices are governed, not by her own needs, but by her circumstances and by abdication of her brother Raja from all responsibility. The death of her parents and also of Baba's dependent condition makes her decision inevitable. But, unlike Nanda Kaul, Bim does not seek an illusory world of fantasy, she stays behind to fight. Bim's firmness and independence are not

natural, adulthood is virtually thrust upon her by Raja's illness. She really has no choice except to accept her responsibilities towards her family gracefully. By doing so Bim willingly rejects all modes of escape, both physical and emotional and continues to stay amidst the drabness of Delhi.

Bim makes no attempts to resist the claims made on her as Sita and Nanda Kaul had done in the earlier novels. Yet her role is not equivalent to meek submission of misplaced martyrdom, like Sita and Nanda Kaul's. She has decided to participate in life, involve herself in it and fulfil a chosen role. It has not been an easy choice for Bim to avoid a marital life. In fact she had worshipped the likes of Florence Nightingale along with Joan of Arc in her private pantheon of saints and Goddesses. Her circumstances deny her the freedom to fulfil her ambitions. Gradually, she finds herself seething with anger and bitterness, the family ties she herself finds so difficult to sever with.

Upon her return to Old Delhi Tara realises that Bim is not really happy and although she tries to appear casual and flippant, her mask frequently slips away. Tara realises that she continuously making an effort not to let her circumstances get the better of her. Tara makes continual references to their childhood, their self absorbed parents, their childhood traumas and games. She recollects the emotional security that Mira masi gave them which was denied by their own socialite club going parents. Their parents who followed a policy of neglect towards them, and particularly their father who made no attempts to connect with them have left deep scars embedded in their memory. Loneliness and insecurity, coupled with their mutual interdependence had salvaged the bleak landscape of their childhood. The bonds between them had been solid, secure and interdependent.

Mismatched Relationship

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya is portrayed as a person suffering from psychic tumult and haunted by a childhood prophecy of fatal disorder. Born in rich advocate's family in Lucknow, Maya has led a pampered and secured childhood which had little touch of reality. She remembers with intense longing the breakfast sessions in the garden with her father which was, "as good as elves and fairies who

feast on melons and syrups by moonlight" (43). Fed on fairy tales of Arabian Nights and the glories and bravado of Indian Mythology her mind is filled with astounding tales of princess and regal queens, jackals and tigers. Her existence has been that of a toy princess in a toy world. It has left her totally ill equipped to lead a life of routine and responsibility. The adult world for her becomes an increasingly uninhabitable place. Thus her hypersensitive reaction to the sudden death of her pet dog and the resultant state of a disturbed mind is understandable. The death of Toto disturbed her a lot that she rushes to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes. She continued to run and cry and felt defeated in her own house.

Gautam, her lawyer husband, is a middle aged man much older than his child like wife. Maya feels that while he is kind, logical, pragmatic and generous he is unsympathetic and insensitive to her physical and emotional needs. Gautam exemplifies a Buddha – like spirit of detachment. He emerges as an egoistic and insensitive man with his own distinct views of life, love and religion, which invariably clash with those of Maya. Gautam's philosophical detachment, his indifference to the beautiful yet tremulous beauty of the natural world and his gross concern of the basics of life appear major shortcomings in the eyes of his child wife Maya. In another situation and to another woman, Gautam may have proves a remarkably successful husband. But he and Maya are irreconcilable and Maya is aware of this fact.

Maya's alienation leads her to utter desolation and loneliness. She appears neurotic in her almost morbid obsession with death. Maya's unhappiness is not related to the reality of her circumstances, but it is the product of her own disturbed mental state. Maya tries to analyse her feelings and memories of the past in order to reach the source of her disturbance, and is aware that the roots of her present misery lie embedded in the past. Maya's inability to cope up with Gautam, her friends and other human beings makes her feel increasingly isolated and vulnerable. Her obsession with her fears and her hallucinations finally results in insanity. When she looks for advice she is frustrated. Her father had recommended the

acceptance of human limitation and subsequent resignation. Her husband advocates the Buddhist principle of non-attachment.

For Maya both these alternatives are a negation of life. Besides Maya, a few other women also figure in the story. Her friend Leela, who is nursing a dying husband, is resigned to her fate. Her childhood friend Pom, who had once appeared to rebel against her mother – in – law’s dominance, now quite happily, conforms to her wishes. Maya realises how isolated and lonely she is because she is unable to communicate with any other human being any longer. In her need for security Maya naturally turns to Gautam for love and advice. Gautam accuses her of an “obvious father fixation”, which he believes is the reason why Maya married him. He warns her that this ‘complex’ will destroy her. But it is not logic or philosophy that Maya needs from Gautam, it is only love, affection and understanding that she craves for. Gautam’s preoccupation with his own work makes him unsympathetic to Maya’s emotional, physical and spiritual needs. He gradually assumes the role of egoistic and self-opinionated teacher rather than an understanding husband. Maya gradually withdraws into her own make believe world until she reaches that point where she becomes insensitive to everything but her own obsessive needs.

Conclusion

Desai focuses on the complexity of the relationships between human beings, especially the man- woman relationship, which has a say in the dimension of their personalities. These relationships, contrary to the popular opinion are viewed as failures by Desai. Thus her heroines Maya, Sita, Nanda Kaul and others fail to establish a concrete relationship with others. Desai let her heroines to face the onslaughts of destiny alone and singlehandedly. Any attempt to seek happiness through meaningful human relationships, is bound to cause disappointment. These characters are motherless children and the loneliness, alienation and insecurity are rooted from the negative childhood experiences. The feminine struggle of these characters is destined only to seek greater social and economic independence.

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