Anita Desai as a well-reputed self-conscious novelist of high literary caliber dealing with intricacies and complexities of human relationships in her Fiction: A Brief Appraisal

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ABSTRACT: This paper is attempts to show Anita Desai as the well-reputed self-conscious novelist of high caliber standing next to Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan in terms of treatment of theme and narrative technique and to explain at length her fictional forte for giving fullest expression to the intricacies and complexities of human relationships, existential problems with particular reference the theme of alienation and isolation, and marital discord born out of incommunication in married life.

Key Words: Human Relationship, Marital Discord, Isolation, Alienation, Psychological defect.

In Indian English fiction, the contributions of women novelists in English are glaring in terms of theme and technique. Anita Desai is one who possesses the quality of picturizing her characters in a healthful and psychologically affected way. She is gifted with an imaginative power for effective creation of situations, characters and yarning of plots. Her writing is nothing but the depiction of the universal wretched sympathy and the distressing personality through her characters. She has “the sharpness and penetration of vision of extraordinary degree. She cuts things clean and enters into the inside of things with perfect ease” (Tripathi-2).

Anita Desai is interested in the poignant world of women and her fiction reflects a genuine understanding of feminine sensibility and also psychology. As Dr. Madhusudan Prasad puts it, “An uncrowned queen of the inner emotional world, she dexterously transcribes the subconscious, the phantasmagoria of her highly sensitive protagonists terribly bewildered by the burden of living hopelessly in the contemporary society bristling with absurd realities” (P 139).

The unique feature of her fiction is portrayal of women protagonists and prevails with preoccupied notion. One critic rightly remarks: “She presents each individual as an unsolved mystery” (Rao 61). The protagonists of Anita Desai, both male and female are endowed with ‘Organic sensibility’. In short, they are spectacular rays that emerge from the prism of Anita Desai’s imagination.

The basic themes of women’s fiction all over the world are victimization and survival. Anita Desai has specialized in depicting the undulations of the female self under the pressure of critical human situations and emotional relationships. As a novelist, she explores human relationships in her novels through her characters; she brings out the sensitive mind in the enveloping world as a social realist. Her characters reveal her vision of life and show her as an experimenter who deals with many existentialistic problems and predicaments. She is more interested in depicting the psychic depth through her female characters.

Mrs. Desai’s novels mainly focus on the theme of alienation and isolation. In her fiction, her characters remain alienated and they remain as outsiders as they cannot indulge themselves in the world of realities. The novelist Mrs. Desai took the literary world by storm with her very first novel, Cry, the Peacock in which “she successfully penetrates into the chaotic world of Maya’s consciousness and her psychic states caused by her morbid preoccupation with death and records them with a subtle fidelity. The husband-wife alienation engendered by the temperamental incompatibility between them forms the very core of the novel” (Kumar 11). The novel begins with the death of Toto and Maya regards the death of Toto as cataclysmic whereas for Gautama, it is a natural happening; yet it is the “ultimate absurdity, appropriate in that it brings a meaningless life to a similarly meaningless end” (P 14). This gap of communication between husband and wife is felt throughout the novel which becomes “a fascinating psychological study of neurotic fears and anxieties caused by marital incompatibility and disharmony and compounded by age-old superstitions” (Sarma 24).

Anita Desai portrays women as helpless, frustrated, with a sense of failure and a keen awareness of futility existence. The fictional world of Anita Desai is located in the vicinity of female consciousness and
concerned with the depression and oppression of these intensely introverts female characters are unable to give vent to their emotions. Mrs.Desai is deeply concerned with the problems of communication between men and women, between the individual and the social world, between parents and children. Through her novels, she brings out the thought, emotion, and sensation with the heroines getting her interested only in exploration of psychic depths of her characters. The protagonists are generally neurotic, highly sensitive but alienated in a world of dream and fantasy, separated from their surrounding as an outcome of their failure or willingness to adjust with the reality.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai portrays the transformation of a hypersensitive Hindu woman, Maya. She is an orthodox background seeking unorthodox means of fulfillment into an insane individual. Maya is self-centered, egocentric, exaggeratedly fanciful and unpractical. She is idle, self indulgent, dreamy, and living like an elf in a grotto. She is trained to regard everything as meant for her. Here arises the abnormality of her adjustment with her husband and society and her love of seclusion. The self centered, complex personality, egotistical nature of Maya, leads to tragedy. Gautama sees only the upper surface of her life; he is cold to her ‘inside’ feelings and affections; there is mutual drying up of affections on both sides, increasing bitterness, consummating in Gautama’s death and Maya’s abnormality. She lacks “companionship, life-contact, relationship, communion” (CTP 18). Maya’s fascination for life clashes with her husband’s rational and pragmatic approach to it. They both drifted apart as both of them could not understand each other. The fatal distance between Gautama and Maya arising from a temperamentally incompatibility is the main factor to the theme of psychic disintegration. Thus, the tragedy of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, results not from the reality of her surroundings or Gautama’s detachment but from own over-wrought consciousness.

The husband-wife alienation which forms the thematic nucleus in Anita Desai’s first novel *Cry, the Peacock* is taken up again in *Voices in the City*, where in the focus is on human futility. The three sensitive individuals – Nirode and his two sisters Monisha and Amla move about in their own worlds. Maya and Monisha appear to be outward contrast leading an unhappy life with insensitive, dull-witted parents-in-law. Maya’s life is an abundance of feeling where asMonisha freezes her emotions and trains herself to suppress her. Jiban, the husband of Monisha, is not mature and accommodating. He is a ‘boring non-entity’. If Maya pushes her husband out of the roof in order to protect her world, Monisha sets fire to herself in order to reach the core of her being. But in both the novels are found similarities.

One of those vast, soft, masses-of-rice Bengali women with a bunch of keys at her waist and nothing in her head but a reckoning of the stores in her pantry and nothing in her heart but a stupid sense of injury and affront”. (VC 33)

She longs for privacy and solitude, she wants to be free like Nirode, but she finds it difficult to free herself from the duties. She yearns for the free air of Kalimpong, “the solitude of the jungles there, the aqueous shadows of the bamboo groves and the earth laid with great fallen leaves” (P 116). She has no alternative but to stay in the joint family, nor has she the ability to attain detachment. Dr. Jasbir Jain observes:

“But the detachment she achieves, like the detachment of Nirode, is not born out of Nirode, is not born out of experience but out of fear and attachment”. (P 33)

Had she been religious, there would have been a chance for her to renounce the ‘Samsara’. She is afraid of the inroads that love may make into her life:

“I see now that both Nirode and I shy from love, fear it as attachment, for ‘from attachment arises longing…. If only love existed that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience, than, but there is no such love”. (P 135)

The love which Monisha expects in her life is not available to her and destroyed only by loneliness and a desperate urge to make it meaningful. It plunges her into pleasures and pains, fears and regrets. She withdraws from the material concerns of family and retreats behind the barred windows. As Monisha feels isolated, she tries to commit suicide, as it is only an attempt to give meaning to her life through death. She realizes that the drama of life has gone by, neither birth nor death had touched her and that there is complete alienation “an empty white distance” between her and her fellow beings. In a flash of visionary
intuition, she realizes that her action to end it all would be the most courageous, magnificent of all her acts in an uncompromising unconventional life” (Shanta 257). Her suicide is preceded by self knowledge and it asserts her freedom. It is an exercise of her choice. Another cause is the absence of love that results in the husband-wife alienation. Jiban as a husband becomes failure and he does not know how to comfort her. He is not kind and considerate towards his wife and reason for her collapse.

In Where Shall We Go This Summer, Anita Desai tries to use the myth of the archetypal Sita in the modern context. Sita feels alienated from her husband, children, and in-laws and also from society at the age of forty. She regards their presence as a threat to her own existence and behaves abnormally. She is a sensitive, emotional, middle aged woman who is saddled with four children. She feels alienated from her husband and children. She undergoes acute mental agonies silently in isolation only because of her sharp existentialist sensibility. Sita’s life is tormented by loneliness and boredom. The agony and unhappiness in her soul spring from her unwillingness to go with the society. Having a strong stand, she does not compromise. She refuses to accept the cruel dictates of her society. Her anguished soul cries out.

“He who refuses does not repent, should he be asked again, he would say No again. And yet that No the right No crushes him for the vest of his life”. (WSWS 24)

Through her sufferings, Sita learns the lesson of courage to face life boldly with all its ups and downs. She is seen struggling to find an answer to her existential impasse which continues to torment her spirituality, Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain presents an unforgettable, pathetic portrait of old age. Her life is filled with loneliness, isolation, angst and agony. She does not want to involve herself in any responsibility anymore, for “All she wanted was to be alone, to have carigrano to herself, in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain” (FM 17). She wants to continue her peaceful life of detachment and non-involvement. She tries to remain unaffected by the emotional upheavals and therefore she avoids any kind of new involvements. She could attain a minor sainthood and detachment of a true nun. Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain desires to remain in isolation to register her revolt for a world where women cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural.

Bim in Clear Light of Day is the real assertive lady who adopts the life of loneliness not out of her choice but of her feelings of responsibility, after her parents’ death. Though Bim needs her brother’s help, she never asks for it. All her tormenting emotions anger, guilt, fear and remorse get spent, making her realise that she has plumbed the depths’ of time – “time present and time past”. She forgives Raja. When Tara, Bakul and their children finally start for Hyderabad, Bim says to her sister with genuine eagerness:

“Tell him I’m – I’m waiting for him –
I want him to come – I want to see him” (P 176)

R. S. Sarma aptly remarks:

“This also marks her transition from hatred to love, from alienation to accommodation, from rejection to acceptance, from egoism to altruism”. (P 147)

Anita Desai through her characters brings out the status for women and the exploration of the disturbed psyche which ultimately leads to an emphasis on loneliness. This concern becomes the nucleus of the thematic pattern in Fire on the Mountain and Clear Light of Day. Her characters are unable to attain emotional and passionate response from a world of sordid daily routine. Therefore, they try to flourish in solitude and only come out when their individuality is challenged.

To conclude, Cry, the Peacock is about Maya’s cries for love and understanding in her loveless marriage with Gautama; the peacock’s cry is symbolic of Maya’s agonized cry for love and life of involvement while Where Shall We Go this Summer? dwells on the theme of alienation and communicative lifeafter marriage, with a focus on the alienation of a woman, a wife and a matter, an alienation conditioned by society and family and Voices in the City deals with a terrible frightening shrill against the masculine. In a nutshell, in the fictional world of Anita Desai, the female is not a passive creature. She not only rejects the unquestioning acceptance of the traditional role but also rebels against the entire system of social relationships. The protagonist suffers more and feels more deeply the harsh sting of dislocation between the ideal and the real. The discrepancy between what he or she aspires to do in life and the harsh reality plunges him or her into intense misery. The protagonists, are loners and inevitably losers who try to lead meaningful lives. But they capture our image as Anita Desai’s mode of individualizing a character is out and out realistic.

Works Cited

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