

Emergence of an Aware and Assertive Woman: A Study of Marital Relationship in the Novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the study of marital relationship, one of the most complex, subtle and chameleonic human relationship, in the lives of the protagonists in the novels of Anita Desai. Through the depiction of this relationship, the novelist tries to foray into the deep recesses of her protagonists' psyche and reveals their strivings to attain a meaningful pattern of life. Through the depiction of varied kind of protagonists, the novelist tries to show that some of her initial protagonists are quite immature, having myopic vision of life, who reflect rigidity in their personality. This extreme rigidity and egoism creates insurmountable hurdles for them in their inter-personal relations as well as adjustment with the flux of life. Various social customs and traditions which demand sacrifice and adjustment for their part are beyond their comprehension at all. The harrowing despair in their marital relations and lack of recognition in the family and society cumulatively thrusts them into circumscribed zones of isolation. On the other hand, some of her characters are made of strong stuff. They are quite mature and tend to face various vicissitudes of life with a mature, flexible and compromising attitude. Since they have a strong desire to achieve an authentic kind of existence and this zeal makes them flexible to evaluate the pattern of life in totality and eventually, they succeed in evolving a new harmonious pattern life at a higher level of maturity and wisdom.

Keywords: Chameleonic, Recesses, Myopic, Harrowing, Circumscribed, Authentic.

Though the treatment of marital relationships in fiction is as old as the genre itself, it came to occupy a place of importance in Indian Writings in English with the advent of novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Anita Desai. But Desai's intuitive perception, insight into the various aspects of the relationship and the subtlety with which she renders them in her novels distinguishes her from all the other Indian novelists, men and women both. Anita Desai regards marital relationship as one of the most important and fundamental relationship, both for the individual and the society. She sees in it a reflection of the essential character of the milieu and also the drama of individual's life, shaped and enacted largely within its matrix. The novelist reveals how her aspiring protagonists tend to cherish their naïve dreams of a romantic marital life and how their confrontation with the commonplace realities of life severely jolts their expectations. The writer dramatizes how her protagonists adopt various strategies in order to cope with this stressful situation, leading them, ultimately, especially the mature ones, to carve a meaningful pattern.

The way her protagonists get enlightened and succeed in attaining an authentic level of existence in marital relationships distinguishes her from other Indian novelists. In the works of major Indian novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, the theme of marital relationships serves merely as one of the subjects in their critique of the contemporary Indian social milieu, although in the novels like *The Old Woman and the Cow* by Mulk Raj Anand and *The Dark Room*, women have been presented from a conventional and stereotypical perspective. As compared to these protagonists, the protagonists of Kamala Markandaya evince greater awareness of their identity as individuals and as women pitted against the stifling, tradition bound and patriarchal set-up. Though, they do not emerge as radical modern women, they tend to resist with dignity, courage and resolute will the forces that seek to dispossess them of their human dignity. No doubt, this combination of the traditional and the modern in their response to various situations in their marital life ensures them a distinct place in the gallery of women in Indian English Fiction, but they do not emerge as sharply individualized women with feelings of anxiety, despair and alienation, typical of a modern mind as in case of Anita Desai's protagonists.

An indepth examination of the treatment of marital life by Desai clearly brings out that she has presented this human relationship and its intricacies with a clear insight into the complex workings of human mind. The writer portrays her protagonists as peculiar, highly sensitive and imaginative, endowing them with individual identities of their own. Moreover, they emerge as human beings who tend to identify with life easily, mainly because they do not fade into mere philosophical or conceptual abstractions. They, infact, appear as natural living human beings with all the tensions and contradictions, possibilities and potentials of real men and women. Their varied responses to the pressures of marital life reveal that they have individual identities of their own. This is attested by the fact that some of them tend to remain static, while others appear capable of growth and change. This is because of the fact that the novelist does not allow herself to be carried away by the impulse to idealise and romanticize these men and women in the world of her fiction.

This is what sets her apart from Kamala Markandaya, on the one hand, and such modern women novelists as Shobha De and Namita Gokhale, on the other. If Kamala Markandaya depicts them broadly on examples of womanly strength and virtue of a traditional India woman, Shobha De and Namita Gokhale portray them as highly rebellious and subversive women. The women of Shobha De like Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* and Asha Rani in *Starry Nights* stand out as highly revengeful, opportunistic and mercenary women, reveling in ridiculing the very notion of the sanctity of marital relationship. They tend to represent rather a simple and unidimensional concept of womanhood. They have been depicted as women endowed neither with the complexity of personality nor with a viable and mature view of life as a whole, which becomes evident from their marital relationships, which often end in a fiasco. They, thus, even while championing the cause of women, fail to offer a realistically viable and affirmative view of this most important human relationship.

It is in the novels of Desai that this balanced, holistic and affirmative view of life and human relationships gets reflected through the depiction of their marital relations. In this respect, she seems to have been influenced mainly by Virginia Woolf. With her, she seems to share her views that the woman's cause is also the man's cause and true happiness cannot be achieved by trying to marginalize each other. She does not regard truth as something exclusive; it has a feminine as well as a masculine

side which are “related not as inferior and superior, not as better and worse, not as weaker and stronger, but as complements- complements in one necessary and symmetric whole.”

It is through the treatment of the journey of her women in terms of marital relationships that Anita Desai forays into their feminine psyche, trapped in the chauvinistic male-dominated society. Infact, the depiction of marital relationships in her novels involves a process of self-realization of the protagonist, which basically implies a movement away from a state of circumstantial self-absorption to experiential objective vision. A close analysis of her treatment of this theme in her fiction implies the initial stage of innocence. It is a stage of intense self-absorption of the protagonists, characterized by calm, contentment, harmony and pleasure. In this stage, the protagonists appear to be completely at ease with themselves as well as with the world surrounding them. This stage of harmony constitutes the initial phase of the protagonist’s characteristic journey towards self-realization, as the very process of self-realization gets initiated with the search for glory. Since it is a stage of harmony, there are no traces of darkness of conflicts; rather, there is an intense longing on the part of the protagonists to perpetuate this stage forever. For instance, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* enjoys like a princess, “a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology, long and astounding tales of princes and regal queens...” Sarah in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is driven headlong into marital relationship with Adit because he seems to have “so much to give her—so many relations and attachments, pictures and stories, legends, promises and warnings.” In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita’s quest in life seems to be mainly for the beautiful, innocent and miraculous world symbolized by the Island of Manori” The longing of these protagonists for a romantic vision of life basically reveals that they are ignorant of the tensions and conflicts which constitute the world of realities around them. This naiveté, specially during their childhood and youth, cumulatively exercises a detrimental effect on the development of their personality.

This stage of harmony, characterized by feelings of euphoric pleasures and attitudes, is soon replaced by conflicts when they come into contact with disappointing and unsettling realities of their marital life. Maya, the protagonist of *Cry, the Peacock* feels emotionally devastated when Gautama fails to respond to her yearnings; “It was of no use. After all I sighed—and, once more, was sad.” Like Maya, Sita also finds that her husband has the sensibility and perspective of an average man: “Not an introvert, nor on extrovert, a middling kind of man, he was dedicated unconsciously to the middle way.” This heterogeneity and polarities of their personalities provide a severe setback to their dreams. This clash with the person of a totally different attitude and temperament shakes the foundation of their idyllic world. Their path of marital life appears to be strewn with thorns. Their awakening through experience to the disconcerting realities lands them into a state of ambiguity- whether to accept them or not. Matters are further compounded by the rigidity in their personalities, rendering them incapable to accept the otherness of the others. This tends to widen and deepen the gap between husband and wife, throwing their relationship off balance—physically, mentally and emotionally.

The conflicts and the consequent frustrations in their marital relationships further become exacerbated when social realities, specially in the form of conservative attitude of family members, start overpowering them and they find it difficult to preserve their individually. The novelist basically offers interesting insights into the peculiar struggle of her protagonists, enmeshed in an intricate net of social

customs and traditions. Whereas Maya and Monisha find the family environment quite stifling, Sita develops an aversion against the vegetarian kind of sensibility represented by the members of Raman's family, and Sarah resists assimilating herself in Adit's Indian world because of the fear of depersonalization. The larger social milieu, too, with its stifling conventions and traditions, further plays an important role in complicating and even thwarting their marital life.

The feelings of disharmony and despair become so pervasive and corroding that they drive the protagonists towards alienation from all aspects of life. They feel alienated from society, from nature, from relatives and, worst of all, even from themselves. They tend to develop feelings of helplessness, and, sometimes, even impotent rage. Unable to express themselves creatively, they tend to lose their spontaneity. In such a state of mind, they find themselves out of joint with their real self. This stage reveals the existentialist predicament of her modern women who fail to find any satisfaction and contentment even in this intimate and sensitive kind of human relationship, rather they have to undergo soul-destroying psychic turmoils, shattering the very concept of their ideal self. This takes the toll of their spontaneity and vitality, shattering their individuality almost completely and throwing them into a state of nothingness. This is, in fact, a state of utter despair and meaninglessness, the poignant state of being incomplete and unfulfilled. The factors of outer reality, thus, not only act as instruments of oppression, but also tend to flaw the inner life of Desai's protagonists. This manifests itself in various forms and degrees of aberrations in their thoughts and actions. Failing to find any unifying principle, either within or outside themselves, these hyper-sensitive, but self-respecting, characters of Desai tend to develop certain responses as defence mechanisms in the face of the thwarting and stifling realities of their existence. The emergence of hallucinatory fears in case of Maya, vindictive-aggressive behavior in case of Sita and schizophrenia in Sarah's personality reveal that these protagonists suffer from an existential angst.

This stage of nihilistic despair, however, is not a permanent feature of the life of Desai's protagonists. In fact, it represents only a transitory stage of suffering because Desai's protagonists, particularly the mature one, are seen moving towards the stage of reconciliation and acceptance. It is only her earlier protagonists, Maya and Monisha, who fail to attain a state of awareness basically due to lack of their ability to grow and acquire through experience sufficient knowledge, rational understanding and acceptance of the realities of life, but her mature protagonists like Sarah and Sita, are made of tougher stuff and have a strong desire to achieve an authentic kind of existence in marital life. It is this desire which motivates them to revolt against the absurdity of their existence and succeed in comprehending and accepting the totality of life. This acceptance enables them to attain a heightened level of self-realization, where all dichotomies between their naive expectations and stark realities of marital life tend to resolve. This stage of self-realization is achieved by their ability to develop a more flexible and compromising attitude in their marital relations. In fact, the novelist underlines it very clearly and emphatically when she observes that "if one is alive, in this world, one cannot survive without compromise—drawing the line means certain death,..." Sarah's affirmative attitude strengthens her will and she decides to go to India and live a life in tune with its realities and Sita also learns to connect the prose and passion of life: "Neither sea nor sky were separate or contained—they rushed into each other in a rush of light and shade, impossible to disentangle." Thus, the journey of Desai's protagonists in terms of marital relationships reveals emergence of a new woman who is quite aware of

the complexities of life and through her capacity to compromise, she succeeds in resolving all the contradictions and evolving a new and meaningful pattern. This new found level of existence enables her to assert herself in marital life in an authentic manner.

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