

Dynamics of Self: A Study of Select Novels of Anita Desai

Dr. Shalini Sharma

Associate Professor, P.G Department of English, GGM Science College, Cluster University of Jammu (CLUJ).

Abstract:

The research paper attempts to examine the search for meaningful life in the select novels of Anita Desai. Today's modern Indian woman seems to be in a similar situation as Desai has depicted in her novels. Desai's women show a heightened awareness of life in all its sordidness. A study of her novels reveals her persistent concern the theme of anxiety, anguish and psychological adaptation necessitated by threats to the individual's identity, and relation to reality. Many of Desai's characters find the real world too harsh, difficult, unpleasant and also too complex. There is intense questioning and the protagonists are torn between their search for authentic selfhood and the limitations of the human situation that prevent them from such realization. Her women characters desire to be recognized as women and equally important partners in marriage or any other relationship. Woman in all her novels needs freedom and justice to her personality and her individuality which the existing patriarchal setup with its uneven power division does not grant her.

Keywords: Self, alienation, patriarchy, neurosis, freedom

Introduction

Indian writer's writing in English emerged as an offshoot of our colonial experience in the early 20th century and took various forms of literature. The genre of the novel was readily adapted by Indian authors to become a vehicle of their expressions. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan were the three stalwarts of the Indian literary scene. Women novelists appeared on the scene by 1874 and the first women writers like Toru Dutt confined themselves to writing about their own limited experience. But with the advent of Kamala Markandeya, Ruth Jhavwala, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai and Attiya Hossein, the themes became wide-ranging. The Indian writer writing in English has finally come of age. The writer is no longer trying to reform the consciousness of the readers as in the pre-Independence days nor is he/she dealing only with casteism and nationalism. Promoting Orientalism is gradually taking a back-seat, giving way to an honest appraisal of the individual in the post-colonial era. The conflict between the East and West, the tension between urban and rural life and the changing political trends are being reflected in the writings of these writers. The research paper attempts to examine the search for meaningful life in the select novels of Anita Desai. Today's modern Indian woman seems to be in a similar situation as Desai has depicted in her novels. Desai's women show a heightened awareness of life in all its sordidness. As Asnani says, "Withdrawn into a life of seclusion and loneliness, these women characters have their material needs taken care of by wealth and servants but their emotional needs remain unsatiated" (34). With Globalization, the modern Indian women in our cities are also unable to

cope with the various changes that they are facing. Education has given rise to a sensitivity in them which makes it difficult to take things lying down any more but at the same time has not empowered her to change things. Like Desai's characters, she can rebel and rebel again but her quest for a life on her own terms leads more often than not in failure or extracts such a heavy price from her that her identity is lost. Prof. M.K. Bhatnagar holds that:

Her women are quintessential seekers, hankering after what has since long been routine pursuits for their male counterparts but what appears preposterous and appalling in their case.... What these protagonists strive for is self-realization, self-fulfilment, carving out an identity, a true image of their individual beings, literal and figurative space to themselves, to define themselves, to make a foray into the outward, to make their own mistakes and retrace their steps if need be rather than being chaperoned everywhere (18).

The existential alienation and despair of her characters turn into an insistent longing for death as a possible exit out of their hollowness and it is sought to be overcome by the inner awareness of the protagonists. They try to search within meaning of life, but ultimately, fail in this search and are reconciled to the mental disorders. Desai's writings have attracted most extensive critical attention in India and abroad. This may be due to several factors such as the complexity of form and theme in her novels. Conforming to the broad parameters of the Anglo-American tradition of psychological novel but retaining the fundamentals of the Indian sensibility and socio-cultural ethos of India, she has focused on the important question of status of women in India in the male-oriented and male-destined society. Her novels are broadly appreciated for the subtle portrayal of the protagonists' search for self-assertion and self-actualization in the face of the rigid codes of behavior in a conformist and status quo loving society, etc. In this context Anita Desai has observed thus in one of her interviews:

I am interested in characters that are not average but have retracted or have driven into despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with current, it makes no demand, and it costs no efforts. But those who can't follow it, where hearts cry out 'the great No' who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what demands are and what it costs to meet them (Interview, Ram).

Yearning for autonomy and independence is an important attribute of the sensitive ways of lives of such persons. Infact, world of Anita Desai's novels is an ambivalent one; it is a world where harmony is aspired to but often not achieved; and the desire to live life fully with proper zeal and love clashes, at times violently, with the desire to withdraw and keep inwards. Almost in all her novels, the images of isolation, which come pouring in the beginning gradually, lead to images of affirmation. The self ultimately asserts itself through the abnormal and the unnatural. "The development, from her first heroine Maya to her latest creation Deven and Hugo, is the story of a steady ascent towards self-realization" (Bande 45). The complex nature of the self-created illusions and self-assertion of her women is characterized by the coexistence of, alongside the illusions, a given social framework in which they operate and feel their autonomy enchained. Deprived of the beliefs that had sustained them so far and being without an alternative set of beliefs immediately available to them, they do not know how to grapple with reality henceforth. This gives rise to an acute anxiety which is further intensified by a presence of objective reality that continues to act upon their subjective vision. Their failure, they realize, has lain in their inability to establish rapport with objective reality and in their failure to move beyond their self-created illusions.

A study of her novels reveals her persistent concern with the theme of anxiety, anguish and psychological adaptation necessitated by threats to the individual's identity, and relation to reality. Many of Desai's characters find the real world too harsh, difficult, unpleasant and also too complex. There is intense questioning and the protagonists are torn between their search for authentic selfhood and the limitations of the human situation that prevent them from such realization. Her women characters desire to be recognized as women and equally important partners in marriage or any other relationship. Woman in all her novels needs freedom and justice to her personality and her individuality which the existing patriarchal setup with its uneven power division does not grant her.

Discussion

Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* is fragile, introvert and longing for existence. The development of the novel is not in the unfolding of the protagonist's consciousness but of her neurosis. For Maya's neurosis various causes may be responsible such as her growth without maternal love, her father's conflict with her brother, her encounter with the albino, her marriage with aged Gautama and her empty life without children, gap of communication between husband and wife and above all her sexual dissatisfaction. The passionless act of love causes frustration and heightens the problem of Maya being neurotic. Several passages in the novel portray her disillusionment in sex. Maya admits her dissatisfaction due to Gautama's coldness:

"Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed," (*Cry, The Peacock* 10). A poetry session is arranged in Gautama's house. Maya wishes to join it but Gautama does not relish it. The sphere of Maya's social life is so restricted that she feels suffocated. Maya perceives that she will lose her 'self' as a result of long experience of eventless life. House for her is a cage. She sits nowhere in the centre of importance. She is deprived of emotional support and fulfilment from her husband. The novel abounds in incidents that show that her small longings are suppressed mainly by her own husband. By the Indian standard of a happy marital life, she seems to enjoy an ideal position. She has a comfortable home, an earning husband and a bright future seemingly. These external conditions are not required by her, as her longings for freedom, desire for emotional fulfilment and her place of importance in the life of her husband. Her reaction to her dissatisfaction and frustration which resulted in the act of killing of Gautama cannot draw sympathy but if her neurotic problem had been treated sympathetically and her physical, mental and emotional need had been satisfied, perhaps the tragedy of the couple could have been avoided. Her cry of protest turned into negativity. She said No to the things but in a neurotic way.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? In this novel Desai portrays a woman in her forties. Sita is fed up with the life she has been leading and is driven to seek out her own Utopia. This is a modern Indian woman, living in a well-appointed apartment with her husband and four children. She is like Maya in the sense that comforts and leisure has only added a sense of boredom and indifference to the mundane life that she leads. There are servants ready to help her carry out her household responsibilities and so it seems that she lives a comfortable life. The title of the book may very well be an innocent and harmless question asked by the lady of the house as she plans a vacation for her family. But the reality is otherwise. She is distraught and distressed at her fifth pregnancy, once again, understandably so, as everyone around her feels and waits for her to settle down to her condition with joy and good grace. But for Sita it is the beginning of the quest. Like the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, Sita does not want to

bring another child into the insensitive world. She has been waiting her entire life to get at the meaning of life, for life to reveal its mystery to her. She does not believe that there is nothing more to life than existing and she rebels when she finds herself pregnant once again. She sees the world as a violent one, all the more reprehensible because it is of the unthinking, mindless kind. Nobody seems to be affected by it but her.

Disgusted by the materialistic and meaningless world around her, Sita returns to the island of Manori, her Utopia. Twenty years back, her father, a freedom fighter, had put his social theories into practice there and had emerged as the resident God-man and healer of the place. Her childhood had not been a good one and in her adolescence when she accompanied her father to this island, she saw the island as a piece of magic. "It took her some time to notice that this magic, too cast shadows" (Where can... 46).

Her father's life as a freedom-fighter had taken its toll on Sita as a child. A parallel can be drawn to Gautama's father who was equally uncaring of his family as he spent his time in prisons for he too was a freedom fighter. Deprived of the essential elements of security and certainty which spells home to a young child she grew up in an austere and fearful environment. She has grown up without a mother and does not even remember her. Her brother, Jeevan tells her that Rekha is their step-sister. She herself was ignorant of the fact and is only envious of her father's paying attention to her and she wonders at her being such a good singer when they do not seem to be any good at it. It is Jeevan, once again, who tells her that their mother had run away to Benaras. Thus, the feeling of rejection by her loved ones becomes a part of her childhood. Sita is very much like Maya in her helplessness. She is emotionally dependent on her father and later on her husband, just like Maya. She rebels, but her quest for a better world only brings in the realization of a different kind of courage which her husband possesses and which she decides to emulate.

Troubled by the violence which she finds in the world around her, in the little incidents, of the crows attacking the helpless baby eagle, the maid Rosie fighting with other servants, her two older sons mimicking the fights they have watched in a movie as they play, her daughter's wanton destruction of her water-colour paintings or a bud; she wants to "escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again" (Where can... 23). Child-like, she sets out on her quest, hoping to find the meaning of life, once she is back in the island of Manori. Even though accompanied by two of her children, this pilgrimage is her journey into herself and she emerges as a woman who is true to herself, if not victorious at the end. She is sane enough to be open to the view-points of others and is prudent enough to give in when she realizes that withdrawing from life as one finds it is not the answer for her.

The vicarious approval she gives the hitch-hiker speaks of her desire to be brave like him, travelling in a foreign country without knowing what will happen next. The quality of adventure in such a life charms her. Similarly, the love she imagines between a couple she sees on a park bench becomes her happiest memory because the poignant tenderness with which the old man treats the young woman is what she yearns for. As a woman, she is not satisfied with the mundane love and concern that her husband shows but wants to be the first Priority in his affections. Deprived of her parents' love, she wants to be loved exclusively above all else.

She does not believe in the concept of idealized motherhood and has no gumption in declaring her children as creatures that cause anxiety and worry, a cause for pessimism, just like Nanda who did not shrink from her duties of motherhood and running a household but considered it only a duty which she fulfilled beautifully and would not glorify it or sentimentalize it according to the prevalent concepts in

society. This tendency of calling a spade a spade gives rise to the voyage of self-discovery in Desai's women.

Sita, like the mythical one, felt herself as a woman who was unloved and rejected. "She had realized what a farce marriage was, all human relationships were"(Where can...105). Finally, she comes to the conclusion that she is only a player on the stage of life. She is yet to differentiate as to which part of her life was 'pretence and performance and which part was 'sincere and truthful' but at least the Shakespearean idea of us being merely players holds out the hope that she would find the meaning of life some day.

In *Clear Light of Day*(2001), Anita Desai presents two sisters Bim and Tara quite in contrast. This time Anita Desai presents a gallery of such characters as have their own whim, prejudices, objectives and outlooks and confrontation of the sensitive souls. In the novel Mrs. Desai hints at the necessity of change in the patterned outlook of woman. Bim, the protagonist comes forth as the voice of Bim and Tara, two sisters present two different outlooks. Tara is a gentle, timid and sensitive girl whereas Bim has the rougher element in her which makes her bold enough to float against the current. She accepts life as a challenge and discards the accepted fate of a woman to marry and to be merry. Bim takes Joan of Arc, Florence Nightingale as her ideals. She wants to work. She had been a bright, headgirl in the school and fulfils her desire of becoming a lecturer in History in her adult life. She teaches her students to be changed from a woman of the past, to emerge as a new self. She advocates to have a sense of self-respect.

The title of the novel is quite suggestive. The light is the light of emancipation not only for Bim but for the whole womanhood. The novel provides ample opportunity to woman to oblige with new ideas. No other character than Bim can serve this purpose. Bim, the chief character in *Clear Light of Day*, is different from earlier women of Mrs. Desai because she is no more on the line of suffering from silent mental agony or rage or turning to be neurotic. She imbibes the virtue of independence, firmness, courage and decisive power. If life comes to her as challenges, her 'self' rises to meet them instead of shrinking or escaping.

The problem concerning women, small or big, makes Bim rebellion. She reacts sharply to the early marriage of Jaya, Sarala or Mira Mousi. Since her childhood Bim finds Mira Mousi a useful slave and 'an unwanted person' in her family because she had been the victim of early marriage at the age of twelve and a virgin widow of fifteen. Bim feels that marriage is not enough to last the girls the whole of their lives. To face the heavy odds of life women should be economically independent. She rebels against the traditional pattern in case of daughter as the elders have a target to give the girls in marriage and be free from the burden. Bim's fear comes to be true when two Mishra sisters are abandoned and come back to live with the parents soon after their marriage.

Bim's brother, Raja, deserts her in order to marry Benazeer, their landlord's daughter. After the death of Hyder Ali, Raja assumes the role of landlord. He writes to Bim assuring that they can continue to live in the house and they would not raise the rent. It makes Bim feel insulted. The problems offered to Bim, taking over responsibility of the family after the death of her parents, Raja's desertion of the family, handling mentally retarded younger brother, Baba, carrying out her career, etc. are not the ordinary one but they are great challenges of the time. It is not Raja who takes up the father's place as is expected in Indian society but Bim self-composed and authoritative. Bim's desire to dress and smoke like a man is because she trained herself to be different from the expected traits of a woman being weak-willed, dependent, shy and timid. She refuses to continue the role of a traditional woman. She has all what

society and tradition donot expect to have.Sometimes she misunderstood but Dr.Biswas's exclamation unveils the annals of her sacrifice to reach such a position:"Now I understand why you do not wish to marry.You have dedicated your life to others to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them" (Clear Light.... 97).

Her position in the family entails a long story of her struggle against the threats of life. She emerges as a new woman' with no sign of arrogance or sense of superiority. She looks at other's flaw in the light of understanding. In building up her ambition, Bim is triumphant but at the cost of much sacrifice of the things she had been deprived of in her life. Tara and her husband Bakul realize this:Bim had found everything she wanted in life,"It seemed so incredible that she had not had to go anywhere to find it, that she had stayed on in the old house, taught in the old college, and yet it had given her everything she wanted. Isn't that strange Bakul....She did not find it she made it, she made what she wanted"(Clear Light...158).

The problem of Anita Desai's heroines oscillating between attachment and detachment is resolved in Bimala's comprehension of reality as she has realized that it is necessary to relate oneself with people in order to keep the 'self whole.The novel ends with this revelation of Bim.

Conclusion

Anita Desai's protagonist experiences a lot of suffering in life. In fact Mrs. Desai's interest is in the characters who are not average but "who have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general current...whose heart cries out the great 'No' who fight the current and struggle against it"(Interview Dalmia).Her women are reflective above their position.They protest just for the right to be acknowledged as individuals and to get their due place in the family and society.It cannot be said that the concept of 'changed woman' as revealed in some of her works, is to be taken the model of 'the ideal woman' but they are new and challenging in the dimension of time because they rise and rebel against the general current of patriarchal society.They begin to search their potential and struggle for the fulfilment of their need.

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