Exploration of Women Sensibility in Anita Desai’s Novels

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Anita Desai in many ways, is a representative Indian woman novelist in English whose contribution to fiction is more significant than the other women novelists, such as Kamla Mark Andaya, Ruthprawar Jhabavala, NayanTara Sehgal. She is not one of those Indian writers who cater to the westerner’s demand for information about the Indian scene or Indian thought but to pour out their soul and reveal their vision into reality only to share it with other people. She evolved from a time when the sapling of renaissance in India had grown into a banyan tree. Its branches spread in all directions. Those were the days of conflict between the old and the new, of rebellion against modernity. Anita Desai’s writing presents a fascinating study of human beings torn within and outside. Her characters do have a rare appeal which lies in their highly articulated psychological actuality (Bande 2000).

Anita Desai has carved women’s character in her art with her social awareness and insight in her novels. She studied woman in the background of her environment. With special reference to her sensibility through psychological aspects grounded in real incidents of human life. She records the emotional turmoil, chaos an, agonies of her oppressed protagonist in a very touching manner. She takes her readers on a journey into the mind of her characters that are sensitive, speculative and complex. Desai’s novels lay stress on interior rather than on exterior characterization on motives and circumstances. Her novels are not only concerned with inner experience of characters, but also their inarticulate subconscious life and can be termed as ‘stream of consciousness’. They reveal anxiety anguish and psychological adaptability by threats to individual’s identity and relation to reality. Her women characters find the real world, too harsh, displeased and intricate to survive (Sharma 1983).

Anita Desai has sought to examine the whole range of relationships in her characters and this essentially shapes the thematic value of all her novels. She has explored these relationships with a remarkable intensity and consistency. Anita Desai deals with ‘individual’ rather than ‘society’. She has left the known world of social documentation and skipped the stage of domesticated novels. While the earlier women novelist has confined themselves to the domestic life of their characters, she goes much further and ventures to explore the inner thoughts and feelings of her characters (Vasanji 2008).

Anita Desai, being a woman herself, is naturally inclined to delve on the plight of women in the male dominated Indian society. She tries to depict the intensity of human sufferings
seen in the limited context of family and lays emphasis on the values of the individuals. Anita Desai is especially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. Several of Desai’s novels explore tensions between the family members and the alienation of middle-class women. In her later novels Desai has dealt with such themes as German anti-Semitism, the devise of traditions and western stereotypical views of India. Brief introduction of some of the novels of Anita Desai in hereunder (Ram 1977).

As the novelist Desai debut in 1963 with ‘Cry the Peacock’. She had started to write short stories regularly before marriage. The peacock was published in Britain by Pete Rowen, a publisher specializing in literature of the British Commonwealth and continental Europe.

Anita Desai’s masterpiece ‘Cry the Peacock’ is a typically feminine novel, not because it is story of a woman told by a woman but because it is the fruit of feminine sensibility. In the novel, Desai presents Maya as the dissenting woman who battles against three traditional forces in her life; male authority expressed by her husband; her female friends who play stereotype-submissive-wife roles and; her religious belief in karma. Here, the central focus is steadily laid on ‘Maya’ the female protagonist and the disintegration of her psyche under a variety of pressures; the chief of which is marital discard or temperamental incompatibility.

“I am and I am in love with living, I am in love and I am dying. God, let me sleep Forget, rest. But no, I will never sleep again. There is no rest any more –only death and waiting.”

In fact ‘Cry the Peacock’ is a psychological study of how a young and sensitive married woman is desperately ruined by marriage. Maya showering love on her dog, reaches the height of intensity to bring an end to her husband’s life at her own hands, she initiates the existence of Anita Desai’s sensitive heroines in harsh and cold world, dominated by men, who search for value and harmony in life and either annihilate themselves or compromise with their destiny (Desai, 1980, CP).

It was followed by ‘Voices in the City’ (1965), a story about three siblings, Amla, Nirode, and Monisha and their different ways of life in Calcutta. Amla sees the city as a monster, Nirode sacrifices everything for his career and, Monisha cannot bear her stifling existence in the household of a wealthy Calcutta family. ‘Voices in the City’ is a powerful attempt at the exploration and analysis of the dark recesses of the consciousness of its three main characters in the novel. Each main character is oppressed by the hollow and meaningless existence in Calcutta. Each of them is greatly affected by it and finds themselves imprisoned in towards the cell of isolation, psychologically. Amla is a brilliant portraiture of a rebellious young woman, eager to master life and triumph over every obstacle. Her ambitious pursuit drags her through various psychic situations till finally she establishes a contact with her real self and achieves equanimity. B. Ramachandra Rao recognizes Amla’s move from revolt to conformity which he terms “surrender” (Rao 1977).

The disparity in Amla’s idealized image and reality tosses her between two tendencies-regression and progression; and enables us to see her internal conflicts and the external support she gets from her own nature, in order to grow. Basically a product of not-so-happy a home, she develops narcissistic attitude. Amla’s basic solution is that of mastery of life. She idealizes herself as a superior being, able to fight her way through life without being morbid like Nirode or destructive like Monisha. She is determined to enjoy the city, her new job and her independence. “Calcutta doesn’t oppress me in the least ... it excites me,”
Amla’s quest is directed towards this aspiration. She strives to master all fears and anxiety of life, so as to give meaning to it.

Nirode is a proud, sensitive and talented young man with qualities to overpower others. But he is unaware of himself and of his aim in life. He suffers from inferiority complex. He is tired of his job and is incompatible with his temperament; he finds it uninteresting and contemptible. In order to free himself from the status of bondage of despair and boredom, he even contemplates ending his life. Withdrawn from and unable to communicate with outer world and living in isolation.

“Better to leap out of window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of senselessness over the world. Better not to live” (Desai, 1992, VC).

The female protagonist of the novel, Monisha is in no way different from Nirode. She too is an isolated character fought in the cross-currents of changing social values. The fact that an Indian woman’s childhood is an idyllic period, which she often remembers with nostalgia when she is married.

‘Fire on the Mountain’ (1977); set in Kasuli, a hill station, focussed on three women and their complex experience in life. Nanda Kaul in ‘Fire on the Mountain’ withdraws into a private world of self-willed isolation, Anita Desai one assumes delights in such scenes of nature. Nanda Kaul, however, takes no pleasure from them. Ila Das is truly a pathetic creature, unwillingly during that afternoon tea, she brings into Nanda Kaul’s life, unwanted painful memories of the past. Raka, in revolution, watches the old women recount meaningless memories.

In ‘Fire on the Mountain’, Nanda Kaul, voices dissent but does not qualify in terms of self-assertiveness or counter action. She fulfils her job as mother, wife and the vicarious achiever, and only afterwards, withdraws from the task she feels are alien to her nature. Raka is the crazy one, her protest is unheard and unseen. She cannot find a signifying self and only protest through violence by setting fire to the mountain. Ila Das is an example of women’s courage and strength when confronted by male dominance in terms of inheritance and education which perpetuate dependency from her own experience. Ila Das realizes the importance of education that will prepare women for the world outside of the home and the need for women to look after their own wellbeing. By challenging male authority, Ila Das espouses the feminist cause through her conscious need to empower women, tries to restructure the lives of the poor and oppressed village women. The conflict between the need to withdraw in order to preserve one’s wholeness and sanity and the need to be involved in the painful process of life continues in ‘Fire on the Mountain’ (Desai 1985, FM).

In ‘Clear Light of Day’ (1980), Desai scripted the history of Delhi with a middle class Hindu family. Anita Desai presents an image of women which is totally divergent from the ones presented in her earlier novels. Like Anita Desai’s other characters, Bim too is in search of justification for her existence. The central character is Bim (Bimla) Das, a history professor, an independent woman. Bim is a superb creation of her artistic genius manifesting acute sensibility of an agonised woman.

In this novel, Anita Desai seems to be more interested in discovering patterns of meaning that come out of the apparent meaninglessness of life in a small family. The novel revolves around two sisters, Bim and Tara and their brother Raja. The parents in the family are mostly
self-occupied and have little chance of showing soft feelings to children yet the remaining
members of the family treat one another with enough love.

Bim, who was always a very close sister to Raja and always held Raja in very high
stream, is very deeply wounded by his desertion. She was a symbol of strength and care.
She looked after Raja like a mother, when he suffered badly with tuberculosis. Anita Desai’s
anxiety as a writer is apparent in this novel too. Bim is an unmarried woman so free from
the problems of an incompatible marriage. But we see its traces in the life of Tara and her
husband Bakul. Tara had married to escape from the clutches of her claustrophobic family.
She was submissive and impressionable girl (Desai 1988, FM).

Anita Desai’s novels deal with women where they appear to be troubled and tormented as
the milieu in which they are placed, does not seem to be suited to their taste and aspirations.
The life of Indian women-passive and dependent-spent in waiting is subtly evoked in all her
novels. The myth of the Indian women as a strong, self-sacrificing is not for Anita Desai, to
isolation and insecurity that her characters suffer from, is her real force. The most pertinent
issue in her novels is the condition of the Indian women sequestered in a male dominant
society. The women in her novels are extremely intense, they feel and live but are governed
by a sense of fatality. In spite of that inability to maintain ‘contact’ with the world, they aspire
to seek harmony in it and move towards trying to achieve such harmony. Anita Desai’s novel
does not deal with the large movements of history but with the struggles of the human soul.

The contradictions, the enthralment of India, it’s exhilarating and rawness that so easily
fascinates the non-Indian readers, rather, she looks at the invisible and private, and shall
we say darker, world of the self. It is a comment on Desai’s great skill and artistry that her
work has such an enthusiastic following everywhere (Prasad 1981).

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