
A STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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ABSTRACT: *In this study the focus is the interaction of women's experiences, that is the state of their oppression, suppression and self-determination, with their spatial existence in the three novels written by Anita Desai, namely, Fire on the Mountain(1977), Clear Light of Day (1980) and Fasting, Feasting (1999). In many of her novels, Desai focuses on her women Characters' Experience in the patriarchal society. Thus most of them are not able to achieve full liberation through their struggle against the dominant males.*

Key Words: - Women; Self-determination; Spatial.

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai (1937) is now one of the most recognized major figures in Indo-Anglian fiction. She is one of those who have tried to understand closely the predicament of women. During the last three decades her novels and short stories have won her detractors and defenders and a growing number of readers in India and abroad. The aim of my work is to examine the emergence of feminine sensibility as a concept of reality in the fictional world of Anita Desai. Although where are several Indian women writer's writing in English, I have chosen Anita Desai for my research work because, unlike other writer's, she has laid emphasis not only women character's but on men also. I have chosen the Psycho Analytical Method for my thesis because it is interesting to study how complex a human mind is and how differently different characters react to the same situation.

She now ranks with celebrated writers e.g. R.K. Narayana, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Kamala Markandaya and, has like them, made a significant contribution to Indo-Anglian fiction. She is one of the most distinguished women novelists writing in English language and comparable on the world-scene, with women writers, like Irish Murdoch, Doris Lessing Margaret Laurence and Elora Nwapa. In appreciation of Fire on the Mountain (1977), Paul Scott (who has an established reputation for his own Anglo-Indian Fiction) hails it amongst the most distinguished novels he read that year. In the Times Literary Supplement an enthusiastic perceptive review of her book, Games Twilight (1978) declares, ". . . she writes extraordinary delicate, lucid English which puts many English authors to Shame." She has been awarded the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for her novel, Fire on the Mountain and Author's Build Award for Where Shall We Go This Summer?

Women writers have made considerable contribution to the development of English fiction. In the case of Indian English fiction, however, it is after the Second World War that women writers have enriched the genre, making it compatible in the context of the world literature. Indian women novelists in English, notably Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai have offered convincing creations of a world in which characters live and indicate that the novels written by women novelists have reached maturity. They forge a style of their own, and reveal a power of artistic selection by which their novels achieve a harmonious effect. These writers particularly share the experience of women in general and transmute these experiences into the form of fiction. The awareness of individuality, the sense of compatibility and incompatibility with their tradition-bound surrounding, the resentment of male-dominated ideas of morality and behaviour, problems at home and at places of work or in the society- all come up in the form of a discussion for these women writers.

Anita Desai is popularly known novelist, Short story writer, Screenwriter as well as a children's writer. She was born on 24th June 1937 at Mussoorie. She had a flair for writing from her early childhood.

Being a daughter of German mother and Bengali father she started her life speaking German at home and Hindi with friends. At her primary school level she learnt English and wrote her first short story at the age of nine (09). She studied in Queen Mary's higher secondary school in New Delhi and after wards at Miranda House from where she earned a bachelor's degree with English as her subject. Although she never stopped writing short stories her first Novel „cry, the peacock“ was released in the year 1963. This followed with chain of novels resulting in to various awards including national Academic award for Fire on the Mountain in 1978. Guardian prize for children's fiction for village by the sea in 1983, and has been short listed twice for the booker prize in 1980 and again in 1984. She has also received Padma shri in 1990.

In this study the focus is the interaction of women's experiences, that is the state of their oppression, suppression and self-determination, with their spatial existence in the three novels written by Anita Desai, namely, Fire on the Mountain(1977), Clear Light of Day (1980) and Fasting, Feasting (1999). In many of her novels, Desai focuses on her women Characters' Experience in the patriarchal society. Her female protagonists are often placed in an antagonistic position in relation to traditional ideologies, which are strong upheld by men and some older generations of women, who see the subservience and passivity of women in Indian society as normative behavior. Out of such traditional ideological systems, Anita Desai has made her women characters speak by giving them voices and spaces in her novels to articulate their experiences. However marginalized or subjugated the female Characters are in her novels, through their voices from their marginalized positions, readers are able to sense the tension and conflicts that exist between the patriarchal strategies in the opportunity to achieve full liberation, and liberating strategies employed by women to attain independence and self-determination. Gayatri Spivak's well-known observation that there is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subjects can speak" (1) is problematized by the women in Desai's novels. Spivak's generalized statement has not taken into adequate account the different discourses and contexts that the subaltern subjects are placed in. A study of women's experiences in the three novels by Anita Desai would show that most of her female characters are given narrative voices and this has helped to create for them women's spaces in which to speak their experiences. By making her characters speak, Desai has subverted the traditional and masculinist forms of literature that suppress and ignore female utterances.(2) Her fiction challenges those Indian myths that are synonymous with „tradition“, and a belief in these myths which represents „a retreat to traditional values eroded by modern society.“(3) One critic has further claimed that „this Indian mythic mode does not really provide women with a strategy for liberation from male (and Colonialist) hegemonies.“(4) Women in the past had been mostly portrayed as silent victims. As stated by Dorothy Spencer, Indian women in mythic images represented by Sita, Savitri, Shakuntala exemplify the positive value a traditional oriented society places on women who submit to their husbands and see them as gods, like how Sita submits to their husbands and see them as gods" like how Sita submits to Rama and leaves without a word as she is banished even though she is victim.(5) In the three novels to be examined, Desai has made use of such mythic values and created female characters who rebel against those unjustifiable ideologies requiring women to become self-sacrificial victims. The western woman's attitude to married life in India is tersely summed up by Etta in *A Backward Place*: Marriage may dear, are made to be broken, that's one of the rules of modern civilization, Just because we happen to have landed ourselves in this primitive society that's no reason why we should submit to their primitive morality.

The novel *Mother of 1084* by Mahashweta Devi portrays the psychological and emotional crisis of a mother whose son is lying dead in the police morgue. Sujata is a victim of the family where earth has no roots, where vulgarity isn't a shame; on the contrary exposure of feelings is shameful. The novel traces Sujata's transformation from a passive to an independent woman. Her first act of rebellion was to refuse to be the mother for the fifth time; second to do a Job against husband's wish. Shashi Deshpande enjoys the eminent position in Indian writing in English and her treatment of women in her novels is somewhat different. Each female character of Deshpande's novels brings out her soul's dissatisfaction and discontentment in society.

ANGELS IN THE HOUSE IN FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN: -

Does Anita Desai depict the woman characters in the novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, as meek, submissive creatures gently taking care of all the household responsibilities? Simply speaking, “Angles in the household responsibilities”; offering protection to the children by taking good care of their needs and being considerate and gently to everyone in the household. The term “Angles in the house” also reminds me one of the most celebrated feminist writers’ work that is Virginia Woolf’s *easy, professions for women*; In the *easy*, Woolf’s claims that “the Woman was dedicated to the murder of the “Angel in the house;” Coventry Patmore’s notorious poetic idealization of Victorian nurturant-domestic femininity; To Woolf, Angel in the house “signifies the obstacle to her writing and work as a writer because it is a term which seeks to convince her” that the women should not deal freely and openly with questions of human relations, morality or sex. “Quite ironically, the woman characters in the novel have less of the quality of being gently, spiritual beings full devoted to household chores and living as submissive little creatures obeying men’s demand satisfactorily. Their staying in the domestic sphere is depicted by Desai as being “forced” upon them rather than accepted willingly. Rather than being angles. Both Kaul and Ila das are oppressed in the domestic sphere and live like slaves of men. Nanda Kaul’s, Ila Das’s and Raka’s experiences of oppression, suppression and self-determination will be studied in relation to the private and public sphere. I will also investigate if the women’s existence can separate from men’s domain; in other words, weather the woman characters can exist as self-determining individuals after their escape from the oppressive patriarchal system or weather even after their escape, they still cannot achieve full independence.

Out of the Tunnel to the Clear Light of Day in Clear Light of day: Anita Desai has wonderfully depicted the lives of the women characters and how they strive for their autonomous existence in patriarchal society. Though the use of flash back techniques that depict the memories of the female characters in the novel, we see both Bim’s and Tara’s past experiences, and the narrative also co-ordinates these female Characters are able to pass out of the tunnel” and see the “The Clear Light of Day” at the end.

The phrase “out of the tunnel” is used here to refer to the passage out of the undesirable experiences of the past in order to achieve self-determination in the present. I use “the tunnel” to refer metaphorically to women being restricted to their domestic spheres and marginalized in society by patriarchal power; it also refers to woman being tormented by past experiences and sufferings in the present. At the same time, “out of the tunnel” suggests attempts spaces, a movement which is not only physically but, above all, psychological. *Clear Light of Day*, the title of the novel, suggests the female characters “escape from oppression and repression and arrival at-self determination. It is also interpreted as the attainment of some form of spiritual enlightenment a better understanding of their present situation and their ability to come to terms with it. Based on the consequences of the female Characters” attempt to escape from the patriarchal society; I would like to argue that the women characters cannot achieve total independence and liberation. Unlike Woolf’s vision of a woman’s movement that incorporates a comp[lately changed society, we can see in Desai’s novel that some women characters like Tara has just moved from one domain of oppression to another, and some, like Bim repudiates the conventions of becoming a wife and submissive to men only faces isolation. Bim has to make adjustment to her own value system and to accept reality so as to connect herself to her family and thus the community. Some improvements have been made towards women’s achievement of self determination, yet I would like to say that they cannot fully see the “Clear Light of Day; In the period of anti-colonial resistance, India’s political leaders encourage women to remain in the house hold domain while at the same time encouraging them to strike for freedom from British rule.” Gandhi. According to Bande. Usha, encouraged women to join the national struggle for freedom but restricted their major field to their homes” when he says that, “in the new order of my imagination...women will be part-time workers, their primary function being to look after the home.” I will first briefly analyze how women’s experiences of

oppression, suppression and self-determination interact with their spatial existence in the domestic and public sphere both in their childhood and adulthood. I will also analyze how the plot interweaves family history with the nation's history and how it affects the lives of the two women in the novel.

Daughters in Fasting, Feasting: The Traditional nuclear family, consisting of a closely-Knit unit of parents and Children and dominated by a strong father, has protected and perpetuated patriarchy. This quotation can to some extent correspond to Uma's family narrated in *Fasting, Feasting*. Papa is the dominant figure and the sustainer of patriarchy in the household. The woman in the household, for example, Mama does everything to fulfill all his desires, and acts as his staunch supporter. He is an authoritative figure who does not wish to see his position Challenged in public or at home. Through the novel. Mama papa is never written as separate units: father and mother speak as one, and are united in their support of absolute patriarchal authority. On the other hand, the Idea of the family as traditional and consisting of a closely-Knit unit of parents and children cannot really be applied to Uma's family. The parents are cold and uncaring, and often callous in their treatment of the Children. In turn, as adults, the children distance themselves from their parents and become self-centered and uninterested themselves from their parents and become self-centered and uninterested in each other. In the novel, Desai Vividly comments on the experiences of children in the family under the rule of tyrannical parents. Here, I use the term "Children" to show the rule of tyrannical parents. Here, I use the term "Children" to show that both boys and girls in the Novel suffer from oppression from tyrannical parents and such oppression is not directed particularly at one gender, although the level of oppression suffered by the daughters far exceeds that of the son's. Desai also reveals that to a certain extent, woman can rebel against patriarchal control in the domestic sphere and this chapter will investigate how the women characters deal with such patriarchal control. Do they accept it, question it or openly rebel against it? Most importantly, I will examine the experiences of the three daughters, Uma, Aruna and Anamika, in both their parents "spatial domain and their husbands" domain to see if these women characters suffer the same kind of oppression and suppression as experienced by other female characters examined in the previous chapters. I will describe how the "patriarchal ideologies" lead to the oppression of women that prevent them from achieving liberation. I will also see if the three women experience varying degrees of oppression, in other words, if there is any uniqueness in each woman's experiences. I will also illustrate weather the three protagonists achieve any form of self-determination and how this may or may not be related to their moving into the public sphere and leaving their household domains.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on Anita Desai's novels, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of Day* and *Fasting Feasting*, the interlocking themes that emerge are women's suffering and women's struggle for emancipation and autonomy in patriarchal society and culture. The reading perspectives opened up by feminist discourses enabled me to discern the next of the patriarchal control and its extraction of women's subservience. Desai's work does not rehearse traditional portrayals of women pleased to fulfill the rolls expected of them by patriarchy both in the household and the public domain. Though the use of third person narration and the stream of consciousness that portray the subconscious feeling of her female characters, we see their stat of oppression, suppression and self-determination I the traditional Indian Community. In all the three novels examined, we see women are dislocated and displaced in the society and various attempts have been made by them to escape from the undesirable experiences they mostly encounter in the domestic sphere. By analyzing their experiences in the domestic sphere and the public sphere, I have tried to argue that Desai's women are subjected to varying degree of oppression and suppression. By reading the outcome of these woman characters struggle for independence, I have also argued that most of them have experienced various degree of self-determination but they are also haunted by the past memories and are isolated from the

community. Thus most of them are not able to achieve full liberation through their struggle against the dominant males.

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