

The Discriminated Sex: A Study in Anita Desai's Major Novels

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The legacy of writing is continued from generation to generation with the depth of intellect, insight into the Indian traditional patriarchal society. The era of 1970's witnessed the transformation from the truly Indian traditional women to the women with the understanding in the acceptance and submission to the call of successful life. The transformation of the society and also the change from the pessimist attitude to the venerable conquer is what the Indians represent. It can be said that a woman cannot be analysed as only the woman as she is not wholly responsible for the suffering to the extent that she chooses death as repose. Sometimes it is the circumstance that leads her to alienation, loneliness and suffering. And we are all acquainted with the nature of women that they are fragile by nature. What is inside a woman remains unsaid as she is unable to confide herself due to incompatibility in her companionship. When we see the Indian society as an outsider, we get the contradictory society living in age long customs which is still top on the priority. In India, marriage happens to be a sacrosanct institution, and the contradictory part is that woman has to be slave in the surrounding of her in-laws instead of better-half to her husband.

We have seen that the women can perform to the best of their capability compared to men; in return all they want recognition, appreciation and encouragement. It is in the nature of women to be caring and affectionate. She happily indulges herself in thankless job and loses her identity as an individual as we have seen in Anita Desai's major novels where she has presented the women protagonists in different colours.

Anita Desai, a prolific writer, has immense talent in portraying characters with the perfect craftsmanship in every novel that she has written. She has great command over the English language so is in her presentation of the novels as in India, marriage is the top quotient of consideration to analyse the female worth in the male-dominated society. Marriage is the sole and primary achievement to be seen in the respected eye, so the marriage thing is must and necessary for every girl. In Indian society, parameters are set and within this parameters a girl has to adjust discarding the fact that she is a live creature. If a young girl marries to a

middle - aged man, it is considered normal as is seen in *Cry, the Peacock*, where the husband talks of the teaching of *the Gita* and physical detachment to Maya, the wife. If a girl is an intellectual and after marriage she carries books along with her dowry to her in-laws' house, she is laughed at but the husband doesn't come up to take his wife's side as is seen in *Voices in the City*, where Monisha is the protagonist. In *Bye, Bye Blackbird*, Sarah, the English wife to Indian husband shuns her social life and also discards her parents. It is contradictory in the society where Maya wants all the things from her past life before marriage whereas Sarah wants no acquaintance from her past. In the case of Sarah, after all the trials and tribulations, the woman is the one who adjusts herself to make things right and still unrecognised for her sacrifice and dedication. The feeling of loss of identity makes Sarah wonder whether she is Mrs Sen or Sarah?

The most apt and conventional novel of Anita Desai is *Fasting, Feasting* where there is Uma, the elder daughter in the family, who shuns her education in order to take care of her baby brother, named Arun. The younger sister Aruna got married before Uma. Uma surrenders herself to the thankless job by the imposition of Mama, Papa, who are the typical middle class family of Indian society :

Aruna's assertiveness highlights Uma's depression. Uma, who could never be like Aruna feels disturbed to notice the discontent between her sister's eyebrows and is reduced to the status of a maid servant in the family. Since Uma did not have a happy childhood, her parents consider her to be a burden, so much so that she can neither go to Bombay for the trip to Bombay nor is allowed to make phone calls because they cost money (*Fasting, Feasting* (134))

The marriage of Uma does not materialise and her family stops caring for her. The lack of marriage makes façade in the girl's life. The other problem in marriage is dowry which is the only priority in the arranged marriage in Indian society. The mental torture that Uma faces is unbearable, still the family blames Uma. It is Uma who provides her service unconditionally but her own family considers her to be ill-fated. Anita Desai is the one who minutely and silently observes and leaves no room for mercy when it comes to criticise Indian society. Anita Desai has successfully expressed the expression of the mind of a lady deprived of

conjugal bliss. On the contrary, there is a cousin of Uma, named Anamika in the novel, who is well qualified, has won a scholarship to Oxford but she, too is not permitted to go because she is of marriageable age and her parents want her to be married. After her marriage to the much older man, she is often beaten by her mother-in-law and hence there is miscarriage also. Anamika's husband like a mute spectator does not come up in her protection. The novel *Fasting, Feasting* is the direct attack on the joint family system in Indian society, cruelty of in-laws, apathy of the parents towards a married daughter or an unmarried daughter who were more concerned about what people would say rather than their daughter's plight. A girl has to be married to acquire respectable position and security in the society. Marriage is seen as the only option for women. The age-long oppression is still seen in the society, no matter, how developed it claims to be. The focus of the story is that there are the problems of exploitations of women in the marriage which is considered as a sacred institution.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul, the widow of the Vice-Chancellor of Punjab University, wants to be alone in Carignano remembering her hard days when she found her husband's infidelity, whereas the grand daughter, Raka by choice wants to be alone as she is in no need of emotional support. She wants to be happy without being unnatural. R.S. Sharma has rightly pointed out :

If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of
vengeance for a long life of duty and
obligations, her great granddaughter
was recluse by nature, by instinct.
She had not arrived this condition by
a long route of rejection and
sacrifice, she was born to it simply.
(Sharma 72)

Ila in the novel, *Fire on the Mountain* sacrifices everything first for her family and then for the society, for the fight against superstitions and literacy. In due course, she was physically exploited in the male-dominated society but her patience did not give up.

The same 'never give up attitude' of Ila is followed by the Bim or Bimla of *Clear Light of Day*. Bim presents the utmost positive attitude towards life. After the betrayal from Raja in her love life, she remained unmarried all her life. She believed in actions without caring for its fruits. She manages her whole family including her mentally disturbed Baba.

She is not like Maya, or Monisha instead she is free from psychological trauma. A quote by T.S. Eliot, 'Time the destroyer is Time the preserver' is again quoted by Anita Desai in the novel. As Darshan Mani Singh points out :

Bim is only person left to look after the house and Baba in the claustrophobic drama of served relationship, violated loyalties and eroded lives. (Singh 49)

Bim, being a realistic and not an escapist, achieved her 'identity and herself', in the positive togetherness in acceptance and in positive commitments. Bim plays the role of her motherly presence in her family. After long frustration and anger, clearing all the barriers in the way of reconciliation to Raja, Bim comes to recognise the importance of forgetting to see life in *Clear Light of Day*. Bim as a new person acknowledges to forget and forgive and at the end of the novel attains her own serenity and poise and develops a healthy attitude towards life and accepts them as it is. Anita Desai has created this strong character who goes through all the psychological tension.

It is Anita Desai who touches every nook and corner of the Indian society which is comprehensive in grasping the surroundings. She has attributed her intelligence into she marvellous creations. She is the Homer in women's study. It took a long journey where there is conviction with the faith that without marriage also women can be successful, after all the adverse situation, women have the potential to stand straight; after all the oppression she can be on the top. All she needs is determination, will power and perfection to fulfil her dreams in the male dominated society. To be financially strong is must as identity in the society. In today's world, where there is constant change in human behaviour, insecurity, emotional barrenness, modernisation, sexual perversion, moral degradation, it is important rather necessary for woman to come out of the walls of bricks and master and establish herself in the midst of apprehension and despair. R.S. Sharma observes :

India is a curious place that still preserves the past religion and its history. No matter how modern India becomes, it is still very an old country. (Sharma 51)

Thus it is clear that the female gender is an oppressed and discriminated lot. The blame however, goes to the false sense of male ego and perverted social values and practices. The woman who is praised high and not only idealised and made a divinity in scriptures, is in practice maltreated, abused and exploited by our society. Anita Desai, through her novels has presented a gloomy picture of woman's lot which is, indeed the grim reality of our society.

Works Cited

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