CHAPTER-5

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The most common themes in Anita Desai’s fictions are human relationship, mainly the man-woman relationship. Today, this topic has become imperative due to rapid industrialization, rising wakefulness among women, about their human rights and independence. This is also the result of urbanization, westernized attitudes and lives of the people, women activists’ movements, increasing literacy of women, the list continues.

The new writers are anxious about the fineness of life and people, with humankind with its valus. His inquiry into a number of unproductive lives has to its bottom the profound certainty that it is man’s sense of duty to fight for a life that will articulate the innate respect and worth, which he deserves. He is sure of the values of the struggle towards fulfillment and perfection but at the same time conscious of that pain, misery, and failure of life. Indo-English writer is all the time aware of the problem of dealings between man and woman, between the individuals and the social world. The main concern of Anita Desai is to illustrate the intuitive condition of her protagonists at some critical moment of their lives.

Therefore, the most recurring theme in her fictions is the perils and complications of man-woman relationships, the problem of individualism and the creation of individuality of characters. Indian fiction writers, especially Anita Desai try to depict through their fictions, feminine sensibility, feminine psyche, domination of chauvinistic males and problems induced by male counterparts. In general life, women like male want liberation in all its approaches and recognition.

They struggle for equality for rights of women historically and politically. They emphasize on the value of women in the society. The fiction of Ms. Desai is relevant to all times because she writes about the predicament of modern woman. She excavates the
inner psyche and extracts their emotions to the readers. Literature for her is not a means of escaping reality, but an exploration and an inquiry. She prefers the private to the public world and avoids the traditional exterior reality and physical world. In fact, her real concern is the exploration of human psyche, inner climate, and she unravels the mystery of the inner life of her characters meticulously.

Anita Desai And Feminism
Feminism and post colonialism share the mutual goal of challenging forms of oppression, but they also share tense relations with each other. The common format of feminism is the study of marginalized and oppressive class. Much of postcolonial feminist criticism is concerned with representation of women in colonial discourse. Colonialism celebrates male achievements in series of male-oriented myths, while women are represented in ways, which collaborate with and corroborate patriarchal values. Women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. The studies of representation of women from colonizing and colonized cultures show that double colonization affected women of different cultures in different ways.

Nayantara Sahgal, the senior icon in the world of fiction, is claimed to be a pro-feminist. Her pro-feminist stand is replicated in the psyche of female characters in: A Situation in New Delhi, Rich Like Us, Plans for Departure etc. Her skill is noticeable when she exposes the inner feelings, struggle and escape of women in her fictions. Sahgal has a close look at the romantic fabrication of man-woman relationship, pre-marital as well as extramarital relationships, going through the depths of confused mental state of the sufferer especially woman from the educational background stuck in the East-West cultural conflict in India.

She has focused on those socially vulnerable women, who are fervently exploited by their male counterparts. She has also presented the yearnings of the opposite sex very skillfully. One may feel ecstatic, while reading a scene mentioned in her Storm in Chandigarh. Through her fictions she wants to convey a message to the society that in
the country like India the vulnerability of women is not just because of the male chauvinism but also because of stagnant thinking of women themselves.

Therefore, the subjugated women are going through twofold punishments due to their own ignorances. Nayantara Sahgal ardently feels about female use and male derision towards the issue of women’s individuality crisis. She claims societal impartiality for women, focal point being on liberty. She, through her fictions, portrays the corrosive social codes. Her women protagonists are the mouthpieces for the same. They too suffer from identity loss; they deny male domination and try to re-establish their lost identity. Anita Desai symbolizes the artistic discharge of the feminine sensibility, which began to appear post World War II. Her fictions are categorized as the vehicles to incite psychological culture of Indian women, who are the mute sufferers, stoically poised and confined inside their domestic walls. Her fictions are psychic drama, through flashback and flashforth, self-analysis, reflection, echoing of dialogues and descriptions of places and people. Feminist theory and perspectives are for global interest.

As feminist, there is need to strike new issues like forced desertion by women, sex determination, amniocentesis, wife beating, violence against older women in the family, marital gape, abuses- and so on. They struggle for equality for women rights historically and politically. They emphasize on the value of women in the society. This does not exempt the lesbian groups, who tried to claim that they belong to the feminist issue.

In fact, after 1970, lesbianism was recognized by NOW as a reasonable concern of feminism, even though some feminists are apprehensive about the effect of a lesbian image on the movement. In fact, a woman’s identity should not be categorized by her relation to the male world and male literary tradition. The dominant tie of man with a woman is a significant issue in the lives of women. Therefore, the sexual and emotional route of a woman intensely impinges on her realization and thus, her imagination. Anita Desai does not deal with such problems, which are totally the purview of a feminist thinker. There lies a deeper difference between feminine sensibility and feminist
approach. The fictionist working on the feminine sensibility does not hesitate to pin point the equal responsibility of female characters.

While a feminist tries to see only the restraint, domination, brutality and discrimination had done to the woman kind in the past and he the associates these facts with the present. Desai does not follow this kind of ideology in her fictional world. She dives deep into the inner parameters of women consciousness, explores their mental trauma which is the consequence of search for self and existentialism. A feminist critical approach is equally useful in revealing a penetrating investigation of the role and status of women in society as depicted in original writing. However, Anita Desai and other modern women fictionists raise a voice for feminine sensibility which is not the same, what feminism is. Anita Desai’s forte is to journey into the emotional environment of her protagonists. But Anita Desai echoes certain aspects of Indian society, which, only a woman fictionist like her could have put a hand on. The kind of dissection of female neurosis, which we uncover in her fictions, makes her fiction socially relevant.

I feel that the fiction outlook on life presented by Anita Desai is due to the force of her expression and ideology, both. We sympathize with Maya, Nirode, Monisha, Nanda Kaul, Raka, Sita, Deven, Adit, Dev, Bim, Hari, Lila and others, because they are in search of deeper, fuller meaning of life and through the power of her words, Anita Desai has made them reverberate, the very impulses we feel within ourselves.

Anita Desai, a concerned social visionary, is a keen observer of the society, especially about the place of women in the existing society. The fictions of Anita Desai are distinct for her instinct into the inner life and feelings of women which are bowed down by the heavy chains of middle class sentiments. The fictions are a journey into family problems, which perhaps, are the chief cause behind the estrangement of women from their family. The key themes that Desai is concerned are the westernised view about India. However, ordinary life of the middle class family is the chief theme of most of her fictions. Often the author’s characters in the fictions are the anglicized Indians, who were worn-out of their everyday life and lack of affection in the marital relationships
ultimately breaks the cord of family ties.

Fictions of Anita Desai comprise together the credentials, through fictions, the female conflict against a patriarchal dominated world. She finds fascinating associations between female duality, myth and phobia. To Anita Desai, the life of the marginalized class is no less important and with dignity she has presented a lively picture of the disadvantaged and evicted class.

Psyche stands for mind functioning in psychology. It is the centre of thought, emotion and behaviour of a person and consciously or unconsciously it adjusts or mediates to the body's responses in the social and physical environment. A common trend runs through feminist groups that a male undermines a woman's psyche by projecting her with patriarchal notions. Feminists want to represent feminist spirit and character in a completely different manner, thereby portraying the different shades of the feminine psyche.

Anita Desai's forte is the exploration of the emotional ecology of her protagonists. But in her illustration of women characters and analysis of marriage, although from a psychological angle, Anita Desai reflects certain drawbacks of Indian society, which, only a woman fictionist could have presented. The kind of dissection of female psyche that one finds in her fictions makes her fiction socially, politically and universally relevant.

Ms. Desai designs the exploration of the distressed psyche of Indian woman laying prominence on the factors of seclusion and alienation. Women are suddenly confronted with the mystery of survival. However, the women in her fictions do not give up the conflict so easily. They indulge in self-analysis, self-discovery and ultimately compromise with the situation to live life stoically. They live in their own world of fantasy, while others make an effort to find a way out. In most of her fictions, Anita Desai presents the psyche of a woman struggling for identity in a male dominated world; where she is expected to carry out unite the various roles of mother, companion, sister or a brother.
Anita Desai breaks a new ground in the world of Indian English fiction by shifting the emphasis from the external to the internal world. She mainly illustrates the internal upheaval of human life in her fiction, and focuses on its basic facts. Her fictions outline the inner lives of oversensitive women, who are in eternal quest for meaning in life. She has the strength of reading the mind of common man especially of urban and rural women. Desai has also the command of understanding the psyche that controls human behavior. All her female characters are depicted to be under some kind of neurotic pressure. Some of them give up in the middle, while some struggle towards self-fulfillment. The defiance to tradition - religious customs and social patterns - that women's writing is supposed to create is being brilliantly dealt with by Anita Desai in her fictions. She has upheld the traumas and tribulations of women in the middle class family and due to which perhaps every middle class woman somehow can connect themselves with Maya, Sita, Nanda Kaul or Tara, even today.

Her fictions exhibit the socio-cultural setting and background. Desai's first fiction, Cry, The Peacock, records the melancholic dismay, which drives Maya insane and finally she commits suicide. Maya, a young Delhi housewife is enstrangled in an affectionless, prearranged marriage to the father-figure Gautama, a lawyer. Anita Desai reveals the predicament of human life, its relationship failure and its basic hiccups that appear from the continuous struggle of a person for his survival in the family as well as in the society. Her protagonists exist, leaving behind a permanent mark on the readers' minds.

Anita Desai has a unique approach to women psyche, which, she explores with considerable significance and understanding. Based on the mythological and conventional images and symbols, Cry The Peacock, explores the veiled and latent impulses of Maya's psyche. As a young sensitive girl, Maya desires to love and to live. She belongs to a traditional Brahmin family, which believes in astrology and other upkeeps of Brahmanical order. On the other hand, Gautama's family represents the logical side of life. Thus, Maya is relentlessly disturbed by the rationalistic approach of her husband concerned to life. Maya loves Gautama passionately and desires to be loved
in return, but Gautama's coldness disappoints her. The central part of the complete fiction remains in the prediction of albino astrologer who develops a fear-psychosis in Maya's mind. The dissimilarity between Gautama and Maya is one of convention and contemporary, faith and doubt in human relationships, non-brahmanical and brahmanical arrangement of the society:

The astrologer, that creeping sky magician of my hallucinations - no of course they were not hallucinations, Arjuna had proved them to me, and yet-could they be real? Had never said anything to suggest that it was I who would die young, unnatural and violently, four years after my marriage, nothing to suggest that he even thought that.

The prophecy of the astrologer comes true for Maya's brother- Arjuna. Gautama, as a rational egoist, is unsuccessful in fulfilling Maya's emotional cravings.

Maya associates ill-signs in her family at the death of her dog, Toto, due to her obsession in sensitivity. Maya's conventional and philosophical views in life are being mocked by Gautama who is a rationale. She suffers from a fear-psychosis. He tries to make Maya realize the volatility of life. Ultimately, she loses the balance of her mind:

Her preoccupation with the idea of death and with the possible kinds of after-life, the grip of the cyclic birth-all these render her hold on reality and control tenuous and intermittent. And she moves towards insanity and destruction. The prophecy or her circumstances are in themselves not a sufficient reason for her.

The title of the fiction symbolizes the agony of an unfulfilled desire. The cries of the dancing peacocks- pia, pia, mio, miew, assimilate in Maya's mind with her own anguish. She weeps for them as well as for herself, knowing their words to be mine. (Cry The Peacock, pg 97). The cooing of pigeons in her verandah evokes in her a longing, a dread, a search for solution, a despair. (Cry, The Peacock, pg 35) Thus, Anita Desai shows the center of human psyche through the main character in this fiction.
In Voices in the City, there are three major characters that extend the structural points of view of the fictionist. The three characters, Nirode, the mother, and the city of Kolkata, weave the entire structure of the fiction. Nirode comes to Kolkata for his existence, but he is a congenial failure in his pursuits. Arjuna in Cry, The Peacock gives up the company of his parents in search of his ideals. Arun in Voices in the City, too, follows the instance of Arjuna and leaves the company of his mother and father. In Desai's fictions, time is a great protagonist. Both Arjuna and Arun realize the nerve of 'time in time' and succeed in their lives, while Nirode and Monisha fail to realise the significance of time past.

Unaware of the fastly changing values in the society, he begins to edit a literary journal, Voice, but fails utterly in his endeavour. Again, Monisha is partly contrasted to Maya, and she in a fit of emotional intensity sets fire to herself and dies. The other part of the fiction relates the behaviour of an over-indulgent mother towards her sons and daughters. This way, the fictionist deals with the bohiman life of brother and sisters and the indulgence of the mother. Yet another invisible protagonist that regulates the entire structure is the organic and symbolic role of the city itself. Here is the city of Kolkata, which appears as a living force:

Out on the pillar'd porch Nirode spat into an Oleander, for he felt as though he had swallowed a mouthful of Sarla's sweet perfume. Marriage, bodies, touch and torture ... he shuddered and, walking swiftly, was almost afraid of the dark of Calcutta, its warmth that clung to one with a moist, perspiring embrace, rich with the odours of open gutters and tuberose garland.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? is purely a domestic fiction, which reveals the fluctuating emotional and mental states of the protagonist. It presents an internal drama of Sita's withdrawal from the stark realities of the domestic life. The isolated life motivates the fictionist to dissect the inner regions of human psyche. Sita, like Maya and Monisha, rebels against the established code of her family and tries to get solace in her fantasy. Being rebellious towards the personal life of her father, she remains faithful
to her mother, who had also revolted against the injustices and inhuman attitude of her husband and escaped to a religious place, Banares. Sita, like her mother, does not renounce her social duties, nor is she an escapist in her life. She develops some differences with her husband, Raman, because of her unwanted pregnancy. Sita leaves her flat of Mumbai and comes to an ashram, which was started by her father on an island at the Manori village. She is reluctant to undergo the surgical operation to terminate her pregnancy on the advice of her husband.

To show the internal drama between husband and wife, Anita Desai has divided the fiction into three parts: Monsoon 67, Winter 47 and Monsoon 67 again. In the first Part Monsoon 67, the background of the story is revealed. The strained relation between Sita and Raman becomes the gist of this part. It also shows Sita's arrival in an island at the Manori village. Here, the nostalgia surrounds her mind and she, like the recap of TV serial, recollects her past, spent on this island and this becomes a prelude to another part, Monsoon 47. The past of Sita's father and mother is depicted in the second part of Winter 47. It also reflects the participation of her father in the freedom struggles of the country and finally the breaking off the relationship between her mother and father.

The third part which is the repetition of Monsoon 67, brings out the inner struggles of Sita, her revolt against her husband and her phantasmagoric scheme for the release of the foetus from her womb. She comes for a miracle, but meets despair here. Her own dilapidated house on the island symbolizes the social changes in a period of twenty years. Here, she endeavours to renovate her past and to discover her lost self. She suffers untold miseries in the meantime, but this also makes her to realize the stark realities of her household life. Anita Desai succeeds fully in her pattern, when she shows a character in action. Her revelation of the unconscious threads of human mind gives the structural unity to the fiction. Here is Sita, who reveals her past through a flashback device:

In those days ' she explained, 'I thought I could live with you and travel alone-mentally, emotionally. But after that day, that wasn't enough. I had to stay whole. I had to run away, too, to the Islam.'
Bye-Bye Blackbird, deals with the dilemma of three expatriates, Adit, Dev and Sarah. Anita Desai, in this fiction reveals the intense longing of the exiled hero's emotions towards his native land. Adit comes to England and marries an English lady, Sarah. Having a job and wife, he leads a happy life here.

After sometimes, Adit's friend Dev comes here for higher education, but he does not like the pomp and show of England. He comes here only to be an England-returned teacher in India. Sarah is the only character who resigns all claims of being an English girl and submits fully to the wishes of her husband. She gives up even her English self:

Silent, frozen on the divan, Sarah, and Adit held hands like a pair of children, feeling Bengal, feeling India sweep into their room like a flooded river, drowning all that had been theirs ... drowning it all and replacing it with the emptiness and sorrow. The despair and rage, the flat grey melancholy and the black glamour of India. They themselves were tossed about by the flood-like 'flotsam and then become a part of it, the black flood.

Fire On the Mountain has been divided into three parts: Nanda Kaul at Carignano, Raka Comes to Carignano and Ila Das leaves Carignano. The first part is devoted to the forced reclusiveness of Nanda Kaul. It reveals the inner threads of the story through the struggles of Nanda Kaul. Her husband has bought this house at Carignano from an Englishman. All the three parts of story have Carignano in common. Thus, the house on this mountain becomes as symbolic as the island or the city of Kolkata. It symbolizes the process of creation and destruction. Originally, Colonel Macdougal got it constructed for his pale children, who used to come to this mountain in the summer. Now, it is in the possession of Nanda Kaul. She recasts her childhood fantasies not only to hold the interest of her great grand-daughter but also to give herself the much-needed feeling of significance. The fiction incorporates a bizarre psychology. In her frustration Nanda frenetically looks for aloofness. Life has not honoured her claims. As her original self-modesty has not worked throughout her life, she substitutes it with the strategy of resignation.
Nanda Kaul is a formidable old woman who has snapped all ties and discarded every one. It is hard to believe that Nanda is basically a submissive character for whom love is the most desired sentiment, above everything else. Whatever little we learn of her life with her Vice-Chancellor husband, is sufficient to analyse her fundamental demands. Her flashbacks on her over-busy days reveal that Nanda strikes a bargain with fate. Mrs. Desai's characters are sensitive to failure and neglect. They often struggle to achieve triumph—be it through unhealthy drives like neurotic compulsions or healthy means. She is as much interested in life, with its hopes, frustrations, negations, rejections and the chaotic flow of events, as she is concerned with art to give shape, purpose and wholeness to life. Fiedler believes that a creative work starts with the interaction of man and life.

Indeed, life and art cannot be separated. Life provides the matter, that is, the reality of living, around which Anita Desai's characters are woven. They are peculiar and eccentric. To accept life as it comes in routine is a sign of averageness, and Anita Desai refuses to see her creations in the light of mediocrity. That is why; her protagonists have defiant individuality. They fight against the commonplace conformity and stick to their own vision of life. Those, who manage to say the no and yet grow independent of their environment, are saved from a total disaster. Others, who say no but do not find the positive way to unburden their self, are entangled in their own introspection, failing, thus, to revivify their strength.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Indian English literature is today a fast growing discipline at the levels of creativity and criticism. The earlier shackles, skepticism and cynicism, with which the new literature was born, have vanished with the passage of time.

Today this literature, which was born on Indian soil in the hands of Indians, is widely acclaimed even outside the land of its birth. Speaking about Indian English fiction, Braj B. Kachru remarks:
Indian English fiction is now being studied and discussed in the entire English speaking world by those interested in the Indian subcontinent or in non-native English, and by linguists for its thematic and stylistic Indianness. At least half a dozen Indian English fictionists have created a small but slowly increasing international reading public for themselves e.g., Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh and Nayantara Sahgal. (Kachru: 87)

Obviously, international attention to these Indian writers is due to their Indianness, conveyed through their work in more ways than one, including themes, images, myths, symbols and linguistic nuances. Typical Indian themes are said to be the caste system, social attitudes, social and religious taboos, superstitions, notions of superiority and inferiority. Even more important issues pertain to socio-cultural ethos and philosophical heritage. Moreover, as K.S.

Srinivasan aptly points out, myths are also repositories of Indian identity:

The characteristic Indianness is traceable to the totality of the myth of India, embodied in themes, such as Siva-Parvati, Radha-Krishna, Ram-Sita and so on, they being part of our collective national psyche . . . Tales from Panchatantra, Kathasaritsagara and the extinct Brihatkatha are as much part of the national psyche. (Srinivasan: 2)

The emergence of women fictionists in Indian English literature took place as early as the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But, it was only after independence that they could make solid contribution to Indian English fiction.

The post-independence period has brought to the forefront a number of noted women fictionists who have enriched Indian English fiction by a creative release of feminine sensibility. The ‘woman’ has been the focus of many literary works in this period. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai etc. have achieved recognition in recent times.