Chapter VIII

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Having made a critical and analytical study of each of the novelist and their novels through the parameters of psychological theories and interpretations, when we move to make a close comparative study of the two novelists, we find that in spite of the big time-lag between the writings of the two novelists as well as the difference in respect of country, culture, and background, both the novelists stand together so far as their art of characterisation is concerned. In other words it may be said that Anita Desai as an artist started writing close on the heels of Virginia Woolf and, as such, all the theories and doctrines of psychology that had guided Virginia Woolf also became the beacon light for Anita Desai. Hence, one may note much more similarities and affinities between the works of the two artists.

First and foremost, both the artists give new directions to the art of fiction in their times. Just as Virginia Woolf’s fictional world is dominated by women so also the novels of Anita Desai chiefly consist of projecting the women characters. Like the women character in the novels of Virginia Woolf, the female characters in the novels of Anita
Desai have to play a definite role and function. Each and every woman character is well – measured and planned. Here it is necessary to note that the women characters in the novels of both the novelist are not decorative, or trivial and ordinary; on the contrary each one plays a vital and essential role so as to make a particular point of view in the novel. For example one can very well analyse Mrs. Ramsay or Mrs. Dalloway or Maya, or Sita who have definite roles to play in their novels and without whom the meaning of the novels would remain incomplete.

Similarly it is interesting to note that just like Mrs. Woolf who dislikes warrior’s attitude in women, Anita Desai also does not approve of this attitude in her women and as such she does not present such characters when she does so, she presents them with her tongue under cheek as we see in case of Mrs. Dalloway and Nanda Kaul an elderly lady heroine in Fire on the Mountain, or Monisha in Voices in the City who struggle to fight against conventionalism but accept it without a struggle.

Moreover, a close comparative study of the novels of the two novelists reveals that both of them present characters who are chiefly
under great pressure, a kind of strain that makes them think, introspect, self-analyse and even sometimes react with terrible feelings and emotions. This is chiefly because both the novelists deal with plots which are not fairy tales nor do they deal with characters which are superfluous or merely exaggerated; on the other contrary both of them deal with real situations and with real relationships that exist between the characters facing the real problems of life. For example, we may compare the case of Mrs. Ramsay and all characters that surround her vis-à-vis the characters of Maya and all the characters who are involved with her in the plot.

This brings us to a study of the use of psychology which is very vital in case of both the novelists. In fact both the novelists are concerned in bringing out the true self of their characters in laying bare the inner-most feelings of their heart, in disclosing the core problems of their life and for all this they make use of the psychoanalytical process which enables them to achieve this goal. In other words the entire setting, the texture, the narrative style as well as the technique of portraying the characters are laid on the psychological process which is chiefly used to help them achieve their main
purposes. Hence, it is quite proper to say that both the novelists deal with themes and characters that are essentially psychological bearings.

When we analyse the art of presentation of their plots in their respective novels, we find that both of them follow almost the same pattern which could be explained essentially as a psychological technique. The presentation of the story in both of them is unique in the sense that both of them begin casually from the middle and then gradually reveal the entire plot flashing back to and fro. This is the much sought after technique used by great artists and is known as the flash-back technique that essentially reveals the concept of time, the importance of the unconscious and the revelations of the totality of the experience stored in the mind of the human beings. Thus, their novels are structured on the main features of the Stream of Consciousness.

It is significant to note here that in the novels of both the artists, we notice essentially a kind of realisation, a kind of thinking and a kind of self introspection, which lead the characters to make a journey – a journey that makes a positive progress in the mind and adds positive meaning, dimensions, and purpose to the character concerned. Here lies the real psychological study of the inner self of
the characters of both the novelists. This can be seen in the novel, *To The Lighthouse* in which Mrs. Ramsay is making a journey – a journey from death towards the light of life. This also explains very well the significance of the chief protagonist who actually moves from darkness to light, from search to finding, from death to life. This is also seen in Anita Desai’s novel *Cry, the Peacock* where Maya makes a similar journey like Mrs. Ramsay mainly in the realm of mind.

Critical analysis of the themes of the two artists once again reveal that both Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai do not appear to deal with themes and subjects which are supreme, important or unique. On the other hand both of them deal with the usually ordinary and day to day common themes, or subjects which are selected between the two fold of life and death and which touch the very core of life. Similarly, the conflicts, the problems, the situations are also closely connected to life itself and always keep the readers close to the problems of life. Here, it is important to note that the strongest element that strikes in the novels of both the artist is the man – woman relationship which again and again occurs in their novels. Apart from the common, usual and the ordinary subject, both of them also touch such themes as love,
hatred, jealousy, misunderstanding, arrogance as well as all such other
elements which move round ordinary life. Above all both the artists in
their novels also project such themes as the dominance of male world
on women and the feminine egoism against the male existence. With
such themes and plots which are usual in their works, both the artists
display a kind of universal approach to life.

It is further significant to note that some critics have tried to see
both of them as classics in their art; but this cannot be regarded as a
general principle for them. On the contrary both of them have
appeared romantic rather than classic as to them romance is the
essence of life. Hence they appear to project in their novels a new
vision of the world where exist ordinary men and women with
problems of their own life, its solutions, love, romance, hatred which
are more important than what we find in the classical world.

Finally, it may be noted that the unique features in the novels
of both the artist is what we may call the feminine sensibility that
dominates in all their works. Both the novelists believe that as women
artists they have to bring something new in their works, and as such
each one makes a very successful attempt to present a vision of life.
which is an essentially feminine vision either through their theme or technique, or art of characterisation. Hence, what Bernard Blackstone remarks on Virginia Woolf is very much applicable to Mrs. Desai:

*The feminine mind, the feminine sensibility cannot profitably imitate the masculine. A woman novelist has something new to bring, and so Virginia Woolf experiments ceaselessly in new forms, new techniques, always trying to get nearer to complete expression of life.*

Further, a critical comparative study of their prose style also reveals a kind of affinity that exists in their works. Both of them have been regarded as great artists in their prose style, and both of them also come close to the use of poetic prose which is a unique feature in their art of narration. But what is more interesting to note here is that both of them distinguish themselves for their psychoanalytic method in their use of poetic prose. Similarly we notice a subtle sense of humour, a mark note of irony and a tinge of satire at appropriate moments in their novels. Thus, a general comparative analysis of their psychoanalytic process, art of characterisation and the use of poetic style bring both the artists close to each other.
As essentially feminine artists, it is significant to note that in their works we do have a correct, definite and determined understanding of life. In other words each artist not only portrays her human character with all realistic elements but also shows a definite conviction that sustains her life. Thus, a character like Mrs. Ramsay knows and says what she has to do while Anita Desai’s character do declare with all convictions: “in my beginning is my end.” Thus both of them believe that the women novelists have to do something for women and as such both of them write with a sense of commitment. Needless to say both of them emerge quite successful in bringing out the real problems of women in general.

Apart from the similarities and affinities that exist in the works of these artists, we do also notice in their works a kind of difference. As for example, Virginia Woolf is sometimes regarded as a difficult artist chiefly for her complicated symbols and intricate technique of the Stream of Consciousness. Where as Anita Desai appears rather simple, lucid and very vivid in her presentation. But it is interesting to note that though both the artists differ in their treatment of subjects, both of them come close to each other in their understanding of their themes and in their purpose which is aimed at laying bare the essence
of life and innermost feelings of man and woman. Herein, their characters, chiefly the women characters far from being superfluous appear real having flesh and blood.

This leads us to another aspect of Virginia Woolf's fiction which is very prominent. In order to project the innermost feelings or the sub-conscious elements of her characters, she is using the Stream of Consciousness technique which is related to the thought process of the character or the human memory which sums up the total experience, elements, ages lying deep in the conscious level of men and women. Thus conscious level of the mind works like a stream again and again emerging and revealing the actual state and the mind of the character. The American social psychologist, William James defines it in his book, *Principles of Psychology* (1980):

*Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. The significance, the value of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it. Consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits.... It is nothing joined; it flows.... let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness or of subjective life.*

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This may be seen illustrated in Virginia Woolf's portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay in the novel *To The Lighthouse.* Here, the character while looking at the mirror essentially makes a self search of her life:

*When she looked in the glass and saw her hair gray, her cheek sunk, at fifty, she thought possibly she might have managed things better .... her husband; money; his books. But for her own part she would never for a single second regret her decision, evade difficulties, or slur over duties.*

Similarly when we move from Virginia Woolf to Anita Desai, we find that though she does not deliberately make use of the Stream of Consciousness technique, the process of revealing the mind of her character involves almost the same technique. Like Virginia Woolf, her prime concern is to lay bare the hard covering of emotions, to bring out sheer womanliness in them to prove that they are human beings not devoid of feelings and are in search of love and affection in their life. Thus characters like Maya, Sita, Monisha, Bim and others are all seen making self examination on thinking deeply about their roles in the society. These characters like Sarah, Sita, Monisha, Nirode and Maya are revealed as characters who are always disturbed to find their distinct inner voices which appears to question them
constantly. Such voices are actually the inner feelings of her women characters which are sometimes uttered by the characters themselves to make their comment on the circumstances of life. Thus Sita observers:

"It is like living in the wilds," she said to her husband at night. "One may be attacked one's children may be attacked in the streets".  

We may cite another examples wherein Sarah and Adit feel:

The emptiness and sorrow, the despair and rage, the flat grey melancholy and black glamour of India. They themselves were tossed about by the flood like flotsam and then became a part of it, the black flood.  

In other words the aim of Anita Desai in delineating her women characters is same as that of Virginia Woolf: both of them make use of a kind of technique to give a full exposure to the entire inside of their women. Commenting on the portrayal of the women on this line Dieter Riemenschneider aptly observes:

Thus by directing her explorative beam of light deeper and deeper into their lives; the past of her adult characters, Desai reveals more and more of their true selves to us and to themselves. Tara and
Bim eventually realises who they really are so that they can live more truthfully to themselves and each other. Bim becomes reconnected to her life in the house which initially only appeared to satisfy her expectation from life: Tara accepts living with her past failings, as we have said, without blaming others or seeking their forgiveness. The past re-experienced in its fullness, needs no further explanation.\(^6\)

It is significant to note that while analysing the mind of the women characters, both the novelists also disclose or project the roles that their women are made to play in the society. Usually women are the chief protagonists of their novels and they are portrayed as intelligent, sensible, keen observers of their surroundings, sensitive and play different roles burdened with critical problems within the various adverse circumstances of family life. Thus they play the roles of the manageress, the house wife, the lover, the artist and the centre of the family. Here, it is important to note that often in the works of both the novelist women characters appear to give man a “renewal of creative power by the contact of constricting ways of life .......”
It is interesting enough to find that both Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai show much varieties in their art form. If on the one hand both the artists achieve great excellence in writing great novels like *To The Lighthouse* and *Cry, the Peacock* in which both of them appear classics by virtue of their style, complex form, experimental technique and highly intricate symbols, on the other hand both of them could also write in the most traditional, simple and formal pattern. Thus, Virginia Woolf's second novel *Night and Day*, could be considered as a formal and unexperimental novel. It is a work written in the usual traditional pattern in which Virginia Woolf does not intend to break new grounds in the field of fiction. Similarly Anita Desai could also appear as simple and formal in her last novel *Fasting Feasting* which is a fine example of her simple, clear and unexperimental art. In other words it can be said that both the novelists could belong to the main tradition of writing in the most formal and simple way, and, at the same time, they could rise to great heights and achieve great excellence in writing highly technical novels with new innovative devices and experiments.

It is highly interesting to note that in spite of the vast difference in the age and cultural background as well as the social and economic
settings, both the artists appear to think alike and sometimes both of them pose similar questions and problems regarding life in their novels. Even sometimes the title of their novels appear to pose the question and make the answer too. Thus if we juxtapose the two titles: *Where Shall We Go This Summer* and *To The Lighthouse*, it is interesting to note that Virginia Woolf's title seems to answer Anita Desai's question. It is not that Anita Desai's novel is only an echo of Virginia Woolf's novel but the similarities between the two novels written nearly fifty years apart by authors coming from different cultural background, is rather intriguing. Moreover the women in both the novels are in effect asking the same questions: Where shall we go this summer? To what do we look to understand ourselves? To define ourselves? The answer is simple enough: to the light house, to that beam of light (to the light that comes from within not without) which will illuminate the mind, which will lead them to a self awareness, which will help them live their life amidst harsh realities. It is further interesting to note that the women in these novels appear to do just that. They achieve “personhood”, but do not negate family and society. They go beyond what Elaine Showalter calls the “female phase” which is a phase of self discovery, a turning inward free from
the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. They try to discover themselves but the quest does not end there. With this superior knowledge they try to reintegrate themselves into society.

Further, it is also significant to find that the major characters or protagonists in the novels of both the artists are making quest to understand life through knowledge and wisdom. In each novel the characters concerned feel that the mission in their life is filled only when they are able to understand life. This may be seen in the novel *To The Lighthouse* when Lily Briscoe completes her painting by moving the tree to the centre; she is finally able to understand life through Mrs. Ramsay. She always “knows knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs. Ramsay’s heart.” Now she lets that “knowledge and wisdom” raise her out of her depths. Here the beam of the lighthouse that illuminates Mrs. Ramsay is only a reiteration of the fact that she is aware but unwilling to accept the limitations of her life with Mr. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay’s is not the “image of the fragile moth attracted by light despite the danger of being burned or killed by its efforts to attain it” as Nancy Topping Bazin seems to suggest in *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, she is not a defeatist; nor does she have a self-destructive
streak in her. She has self knowledge. She is like the lighthouse, “a symbol of clear sighted knowledge about oneself and the world”\textsuperscript{10}. She can be a perfect hostess, an indulgent mother, a sympathetic wife and a helpful friend. Yet there is something that is lacking in her life of which she is aware of:

So boasting of her capacity to surround and protected, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by .....\textsuperscript{11}

She is aware that her life is incomplete. So does she feel when she watches the sea with its myriad changes:

\textit{........... so the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts .... but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly ..... had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life .....} \textsuperscript{12}

She is aware of “the measure of life”, the beam from the lighthouse only re-emphasizes her knowledge. But she plays her role of a wife, a mother, a friend and a hostess to perfection not as someone oblivious to life’s problems but as one who is fully aware of them. And there is something which she realises that cannot be shared with others:
She took a look at life, for she had a clear sense of it there, something real, something private, which she shared neither with her children nor with her husband.\textsuperscript{13}

And still she has got to live in society and she does this excellently. Therefore, to Lily she becomes the source, the lighthouse of self realisation. Years after death, Lily is able to understand Mrs. Ramsay and through her, she is able to come to an understanding of herself:

\textit{It seemed as if the solution had come to her: she knew how what she wanted to do. She owed it all to her.}\textsuperscript{15}

All this is to be attributed to Mrs. Ramsay who answers that vital question of life:

\textit{What is the meaning of life?}\textsuperscript{16}

Similarly, when we move to \textit{Where Shall We Go This Summer}, Sita echoes Lily Briscoe: “What is the meaning of life?” Sita who is in her forties, married to a well-to-do man and mother of four children, is always reminded of this question. When she is pregnant with the fifth issue, she suddenly realises that she has been living
rather a mundane life. She knows, as Mrs. Desai closely points out in her *Replies to the Questionnaire*:

...... *It should be too ironical .. to accept the world at face value and regard it as the whole or the only truth.*

She further questions and she is only aware that it is easy to "flow with the current it makes no demands, it costs no effort." But she becomes tired and bored of "the sub human placidity, calmness and sluggishness" of her life. She compares herself with that of a jelly fish under the deep sea "far beneath the level where light penetrated " and tossed up and thrown on to the sand bar". So she decides to put this 'non-existence' behind and to go to the island where there are no traditional mores to inhibit her. Her understanding of self and the realisation that she cannot remain all by herself on an island cut off from humanity. She knows that no woman is an island, and she has to go back, that the sojourn is over. The summer is not eternal, it will be followed by harsh monsoons. These cyclical seasons are but a reality of life. Sita searches for a way to break the monotonous pattern of her life. She returns a more mature and enlightened individual who is able to combine the drabdest things of
life with the most romantic imagination and feelings. She goes back not as a defeated individual but as woman who has realised herself and has, therefore accepted the complexities of life.

Thus, the women characters in the novels of both the artists are making close self – introspection in order to find to what extent they have fulfilled their mission in life. All the three women life Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe and Sita have been asking, discussing and analysing one question: “But what have I done with my life?” Mrs. Ramsay may be a loving mother and a concerned wife; Lily may be an old maid, and Sita may question her pregnancy. These may seem to be superficial dissimilarities between the three women, but the comment of Michael Rasen on Mrs. Ramsay and Lily in Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* can be very well extended to include Sita as well:

> What unites ....... them, despite their personal differences, however, is their mutual reverence for life and their desire to make something ordered and whole out of the flux around them.  

\[ \sqrt{\text{They all have their vision, a common vision. Mrs. Ramsay has it in the early part of the novel whereas Lily and Sita mature with it}} \]
towards the end of the novel. Like Mrs. Ramsay, they learn to live in the society, and their perception is best expressed by Mrs. Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*:

\[\ldots\ldots\;\text{there is no gate, no Lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind}.\]^{22}

Being aware that their mind and their vision cannot be denied to them, knowing that they thus 'achieved personhood,' achieved self realisation, they can return to society or become a part of it. Therefore Lily expresses like Mrs. Ramsay:

\[\text{It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought \ldots.}\]
\[I\;\text{have had my vision.}\]^{23}

Similarly, Sita experiences a gush of emotion on seeing her husband; she decides to go back for "It was Over."^{24}

This common self-realisation: "All that I am I will not deny,"^{25} makes these women happy about their existence as women. Their acceptance of the fact that there is a driving need to *feel good* about being a woman, along with an acceptance of the fact that".......... we will come to a dead end if we keep on talking in terms of women alone,"^{26} makes their life complete and whole.
Thus, a general comparative study of the women characters of Anita Desai and Virginia Woolf as well as close a comparison of the attitude, the art of characterisation, and the technique along with the psychoanalytical projection of the minds of their characters, clearly establish similarities and affinities between their works. Although both of them belong to different countries having altogether different cultural background, both the artists stand together so far as their attitude towards their women characters are concerned. Not only do they attempt to lay bare the inner most buried feelings of their characters, they also aim at displaying their women involved in all the problems and situations of their respective families with a positive sense of responsibility and a deep sense fulfilling their responsibilities as the manageress or the pillars of their family life. Herein, both the artists come close to each other in spite of the difference in the age, as well as in the cultural, social and political background.

Finally, it may be concluded that as a pioneer of the Stream of Consciousness technique in fiction, Virginia Woolf had a definite impact on the art of Anita Desai. Much of the technical aspects as well as psychoanalytical process chiefly relating to the conscious self of the characters may be seen in the novels of Anita Desai. Although
Virginia Woolf as an artist of new technology occupies a unique place in the field of European fictions, Anita Desai may not claim this place altogether, and yet, we find that in the field of Indian fiction she occupies as high a place as Virginia Woolf in England. In other words both the artists are unique in their achievements in their works as many aspects of their characters and protagonists in general and much of their technical devices as well as stylistic approach are not only similar but open a new vista for further research in the field of the comparative study.
NOTES

4. Desai, Anita : *Where Shall We Go This Summer* Orient Paper Backs New Delhi, 1982 pg. 43-44

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26. Ibid, p. 86