Role of Female Psyche in the Feminine Quest

Women have always been the subject of literary work but literature has mostly been created by men. Because of this, an authentic question arises, as how much men know about the feminine psyche, and even if they know how much is it true. Of late there has emerged a group of women novelists who try to give a genuine rendering of the female sensibility from their own point of view. Women writers of all ages have a natural preference for writing about women characters. Anita Desai is no exception, for she has also written by and large about women characters.

Anita Desai has added a new dimension to Indo-Anglian fiction by concentrating on the exploration of the troubled psyche of her characters, especially, the women in particular. It is, infant, gratifying on the one hand and quite interesting on the other hand that the women writers in Indo-Anglian fiction have shown greater understanding and verve to delve deep into the psyche of the Indian characters. N.R. Gopal has gone into the details thus:

Fortunately this movement from the outward gross realities to inward complexities found as it’s mouth-piece in a number of
women novelists, who by the peculiar situation of their existence have been able to see the Indian complexities from close quarters, when constraints of vivid hues and shades work upon the sensitive individuals. Of these women novelists, Anita Desai happens to be the leading voice. We may miss in her fiction the customary strains of rural poverty, caste and class conflicts, but she has fascinating stories to tell about individuals who have to traverse a ground too tricky and treacherous to handle smoothly.

(Gopal 4)

Concerned mainly with the atmosphere of the psyche Desai creates opulent gallery of those characters, who are different from those of other Indo-Anglian writers. What matters for Desai is the psychic tension of these characters. She has no doubt championed the cause of woman in her works. But what distinguishes her from the rest of Indo-Anglian writers is her pre-occupation with the psyche of the individuals. She has depicted through her characters, feminine personality and feminine psyche better than other Indo-Anglian novelists. According to N.R. Gopal, “In different novels, Anita Desai has portrayed different facets of human feminine psyche”.

(Gopal 31) Thus, she has succeeded in presenting the feminine
psyche with all its variety and shades.

Anita Desai speaks to us not only the tumult of the human soul but also of its depth. It is through “the quality of mind and soul alone” (Iyengar 343) that Anita Desai’s novels would be a major contribution to literature. She “probes deep into the inner recesses of the psyche of the character and delves deeper and deeper in a character rather than going round about it.” (Jain 68) By shifting the realm of her novels from outer to inner reality and fathoming the nocturnal recesses of the human psyche, she brought the Indo-Anglian novel into the mainstream of European and American fiction. Unlike the other Indo-Anglian novelists, Anita Desai’s predominant concern is not with society and social forces but the individual psyche and its interaction with social values.

Desai’s forte is the exploration of the interior world, plunging into the limitless depth of the mind, and bringing into relief the hidden contours of the human psyche. This main thrust on the inner life of the individual on myriads of inner impressions, passing fancies and fleeting thoughts, together with her razor-like sharp
awareness of the futility of existence is perceptible in each of her novels. Turning inward, her fiction plunges into the innermost depth of the human psyche to fathom its mysteries, the chaos inside the mind.

Primarily interested in exploring the psychic depth of her female characters, Desai may be said to be doing something unique among the contemporary Indian-English novelists. She considers the outside world and action only tip of the iceberg, the bulk of which remains submerged. Through her novels, she tries to bring about the submerged portion of it. Asnani says in this connection, “Whatever action there is in her novels is part of the integral whole composed of the human psyche, the human situation”. (Asnani 5)

Anita Desai is predominantly concerned with female characters. She is not only concerned with normal women but also with women of disturbed mental status. N.R. Gopal has correctly pointed out in this connection, “Anita Desai not only explores and portrays the feminine psyche of a common woman but also of the subnormal bordering on abnormal women”. (Gopal 22)
In nearly all novels of Desai, female psyche plays dominating role in bringing on the surface females’ quest for liberty from marital bondages, traditional bondages and discontented life of womanhood.

Anita Desai’s first novel *Cry, the Peacock* is the story of a sensitive, introvert woman Maya married to a rational husband. The novel has been rightly described as a psychological novel. R.S. Sharma writes:

Cry, the Peacock, Anita Desai’s first novel is also perhaps the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in Indian writing in English. Initially the novel shocks us with its neurotic and near morbid obsession with death, but a closer study we admire the writer’s skill in capturing the psychic states of a woman. (Sharma 24)

Darshan Singh Maini considers *Cry the Peacock* as “a typically ‘feminine’ novel not because it is a story of a woman told by a woman but because …fruit of feminine sensibility”.

Maya, the protagonist is in quest for liberty from marital bondages. Though Gautama is a faithful husband who takes care of
Maya and loves her in his own way yet Maya is never satisfied and happy. She feels that Gautama never cares for her and does not have any feeling for her. The death of Maya’s pet dog Toto makes matter worse. This incident troubles Maya a lot. But Gautama a practical man takes this event easy and consoles Maya in his own way and says he would bring another dog for her. His indifference hurts Maya. In order to console her he offers a cup of tea without realizing her state of mind. This mechanical gesture only makes her brood over Gautama’s insensitivity:

Showing how little he knows of my misery, or how to comfort me. Giving me an opal sing to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge of Gold … telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me … it is his hardness – no, no not hardness but the distance he coldly keeps from me. (9)

This example clearly reveals Maya’s psyche and her uneasiness with her husband Gautama, who doesn’t understand her. Her psychic self brings on surface her desire for liberty from marital
bondage.

Although Maya and Gautama are living as husband and wife yet they are strangers to each other, following their own way. They talk and converse while strolling together but it is only a meaningless conversation that does not bring them closer or inspire Maya:

And so we strolled up and down the lawn, talking desultorily, not really listening to each other, being intent on our own paths, which howsoever run parallel and closely enough for us to briefly brush against each other now and then reminding us.

(18)

This example of Maya’s psyche brings on surface the marital disharmony, which makes her long for liberty. Maya has stifling sense of loss of liberty, which is denied to her due to her marriage to a man, fatherly in age.

Spouses as life–partners are supposed to share the joys and sorrows of each other. However, Maya feels miserable because “he had not the faintest knowledge of her” (114) Gautama’s over busy life does not provide an opportunity for physical intimacy. Maya’s
psychic self in such moment is expressed in the following words:

But when I went to rouse him from the couch, with a touch I saw that he had closed his eyes not with mere tiredness but in profound … sleep and was very far from any world of mine … I hesitated wishing to summon him to me, yet knowing, he could never join me. It was of no use. (93)

Due to the temperamental incompatibility marriage becomes bondage for Maya. She yearns liberty from marital bondage. She sees possibility of liberty from marital bondage in the death of Gautama:

The man who had no contact with the world or with me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact ‘what would it matter to him? It was I, I who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the sight of the rain clouds … (175)

Thus with the help of female psyche is the case of Maya Desai reveals her longing for liberty from marital bondage.

**Voices in the City** is the story of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters Monisha and Amla who are caught in the cross currents of changing social values. N.R. Gopal says, “In this novel also
Anita Desai has portrayed feminine psyche mainly through the character Monisha”. (Gopal 24) Monisha is also in quest for liberty from repressed life of womanhood.

Monisha lives in her husband’s house with too many members. She is discontented due to being a woman. Being a daughter-in-law of family she has a room of her own but her sister-in-law barge into her without hesitation. She says:

> I think that what separates me from this family heaving and rolling beneath me in its dreams of account books, pensions, examination results, stores, rooms, births, marriages, ovaries, wombs, dowries, locks, keys, property, litigation, wills, bequests, orphans, adoptions, relations, marriages, birth and property. (138-39)

Through Monisha, Anita Desai has portrayed the psyche of a sensitive, intellectual woman who feels suffocated in uncongenial atmosphere of her in-laws’ house. She is happy neither with her husband nor with his family members. She seems to have been transplanted in the wrong soil. She would have got rid of family because of which she was doomed to live discontented life of
womanhood, had she been a believer. She records her psychic self in her diary:

If I had religious faith, I could easily enough renounce all this.

But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to, and so I must stay. The family here, and their surroundings, tell me such a life cannot be lived a life dedicated to nothing.

She is in quest for liberty from traditional bondages in which women are caught in patriarchal society. She thinks that women spend their lives like birds in cages. Whenever she wants to go away from Jiban’s house, she feels the bars of the window of her room imprisoning her.

I long to thrust my head out of the window – and can not the bars were closely set. (110)

It is Monisha’s destiny to reside inside house for she is a woman.

She ponders over the repressed condition of women:

… the tired balconies four tiers of than which rise all around us, shutting out light and enclosing shadows like stagnant well water. The balconies have metal railings, intricately crisscrossed: one could not thrust one’s head through them.(113)
These examples of Monisha’s psyche reveal her desire for liberty from traditional bondages in which she is caught because of being a wife and daughter in law. She feels that women spend their lives without any sense of identity:

Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self –
centered and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical,
waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars,
those terrifying black bars that shut us in the old houses. …

(120)

Because of being a woman she is not permitted to touch her husband’s money without prior permission. When she takes money without asking her husband she is accused of theft. She writes in her diary her psychic self:

I am accused of theft. These pettiest people … They think me a thief. To be regarded so low by men and women themselves so low, it is to be laid on a level lower than the common earth (136)

Monisha is in contrast with the other Bengali women; Bengali women sacrifice their life for the husband and the family while living within the four walls of the house. The life of a woman is
never happy therefore seeks Monisha liberty from womanhood. She reflects on the repressed condition of Bengali women:

Bengali women … follow five paces behind their men. They wear saris of dullest colours, beige and fawn and off white, like the female birds in the cages, and there is something infinitely gentle, infinitely patient about their long eyes, the curve of their shoulders, their manner of walking, which arouses not aggressiveness in one … but a protective feeling … I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the Bhagvad – Gita and the Ramayana, in the dim light of sooty lamps. (124)

Monisha regards her life discontented. She wants to get rid of it. She says: “ … then it is a choice between death and mean existence and that, surely is not a difficult choice”. The life of a woman like Monisha can never be happy in the given circumstances and the result is that she burns herself to death to get liberty from her discontented life. Her death wish to get liberty is depicted with
the help of her psychic self. She feels herself totally submerged in darkness. She desires to separate herself from Jiban’s family:

Leave me to gather the stars, frosty & distant and cool. Leave me to gather & then to reject them. Queenly, I’ll have only the darkness. Only the dark spaces between the stars, for they are the only thing on the earth that can comfort me, rub a balm into wounds, into my throbbing head, and bring me this coolness, this stillness, this interval of peace. Even sleep has not this sweet swaying stillness as these immensities of the night, sky to which I tip my face, allowing them to fall into my eyes, and fall. Sleep has nightmares. This, this empty darkness has not so much as a dream. It is one untitled waste, a desert to which my heart truly belongs. (138)

Thus Monisha’s psychic self reveals her desire for death with the help of which she attains liberty from discontented life of womanhood and traditional bondages.

Desai’s *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* depicts the inner world of its protagonist Sita. The novel tells the story of middle-aged Sita, who is in quest for liberty from discontented life of womanhood in society. Sita becomes so upset with the life of
womanhood that she withdraws into her psyche of childhood days. Sita sees herself as a wounded eagle in the traditional surroundings. A.K. Ambekar has observed:

Sita sees herself as a wounded eagle. The crows represent the callous society around her. In the first incident of the novel, Sita finds that crows are joyously screeching and pecking at something on the ledge below the balcony of her flat. It is an eagle, injured and unable to fly. She is infuriated at the crows and tries to drive them away with the help of a toy gun. (Ambekar 203)

This psychic act of saving eagle from crows shows Sita quest for liberty from discontented life of womanhood.

Sita is eager to escape from her unhappy surroundings by slipping through the fisherman’s net. She always has the feeling of being tied with a chain, which ‘can only throttle, choke, and enslave’. (87) Her house ‘seemed so like a jail’ to her and the barbed wire of prudence, caution, routine and order’ only made her life disorderly’. (118)

She feels uneasiness among the members of her husband’s
family. She is particularly upset by half–smiling womenfolk of her husband’s house – ‘chopping, slicing … the incredible quantities of vegetables they daily devoured. To her, they are hardly different from elephants ‘eating grass, shifting from foot to foot, swaying their trunks, small eyed eating’. The household seemed to have only one problem to face and solve i.e. of food, “if meals were not being eaten, then they were being cooked, or cleaned up after, or planned”” (48-49) Excessive concern for eating makes Sita feel discontented with her life being a woman. She develops a sense of being flattened … ‘stretched out so vast, so flat, so deep’. (50) She feels ‘suffocated by their vegetarian complacency’. Her husband’s behaviour is ‘usually as stolid as soundly locked gate. Raman’s is a traditional Hindu family where a woman cannot stay freely. She violently reacts against petrified dullness of womanhood. She takes to smoking openly in her husband’s house where even men do not smoke openly. She wears ‘the garment of a memorialized washerwoman’s which are so limp, so faded’. She expresses her psyche in following statement:
Oh, Menka … I wish I had your talent I would nurse it so
carefully like a plant … make it grow, grow. I used to think …
after I left this island and had to think what I would do next …
that I only I could paint, or sing or play the sitar well, really
well. I should have grown into a sensible woman … (117)

Thus Sita’s psyche reveals her discomteent from the life of
womanhood and her longing for liberty from this life.

Fasting, Feasting in the story of Uma, an unattractive girl
brought up in the middle class family. Her life as depicted in the
novel raises a question: What it means to be a girl without striking
feature? Through out the novel she is in quest for liberty from
discontented life of womanhood in a traditional family. Being a
female she is entrusted with the household work. Being docile,
innocent and sensitive Uma is made to suffer. Her imprisoned soul
desires for a space of its own. She wants to go away into her own
spiritual or mental world of abandonment. The spirit of revolt
welling up within a helpless soul trapped in the snares of
domicity surfaces on one occasion when Uma is engrossed in
reading Wilcox poems, ignoring Mama’s persistent calls to bring
She screams at them silently … her lence, roars at them …

‘Here’ her eyes flash through her spectacles, this is what I know
and you don’t.

This example of Uma’s psyche reveals her desire for liberty from discontented life of womanhood.

Uma makes two attempts to drown in the river, in order to get liberty from the discontented life of womanhood. She wants to merge with the river when she goes along with Mira Masi on a ritual dip:

She sank up to her chin and the current carried her away. It had not occurred to her that she needed to know how to swim, she had been certain the river would sustain her. (43)

Her second attempt at making a watery grave for herself to get liberty from traditional society is even more deliberately sought after.

When she had plunged into the dark water and let it close quickly and tightly over her the flow of the river, the current, drew her along, clasping her and dragging her with it. It was not fear she felt, or danger. Or rather these were only what edged
something much darker, wilder, more thrilling, a kind of exultation – it was exactly what she had always wanted, she realized. Then they had saved her. The saving was what made her shudder and cry (111)

These two psychic attempts to drown herself on the part of Uma clearly bring on surface her attempt to get liberty from discontented life of womanhood.

Being a female Uma is denied a normal woman’s life. An opportunity to get liberty from discontented life of womanhood comes in form of job, which is offered by Dr. Dutt, who needs a supervisor for her nurses’ hostel. Uma tried to say, “yes, please, yes please, yes pleaseyes” (143). But the offer was turned down by Papa even before she could have said something, she was sent to kitchen:

She stood there, wrapping her hands into sari, saying into the corner behind the ice-box: Pleaseplease please – (144).

She does not accept this exploitation without chafing and sometimes “she i(s) seized with a longing to stir up that viscous greyness, to bring to life some evidence of colour, if not in her life,
then in that of another”. (122)

These psychic acts on the part of Uma bring on surface her longing for liberty from discontented life of womanhood.
Works Cited

Ambekar, K.P. “Symbolism in Where Shall We Go This Summer?”

   Indian Women Novelist. III op. cit., P. 203


