



Feminine sensibility in Voices in the city

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Abstract:

The present study is aimed at examining the commonly recurring image of the lonely woman protagonists in the novels of Anita Desai, chiefly to explore the feminine psyche in the different stages of a woman's life, particularly the influences that shaped the feminine psyche that makes it conform to rigid patriarchal structures, and to analyse the different thought patterns that emerge from the different experiences portrayed in the novels with reference of the main characters. These thought patterns emerge from the battle-ground of life itself with relation to the main characters in the novels.

KeyWords: Sensibility, Feminine, Psychology

1. Introduction

The present study is aimed at examining the commonly recurring image of the lonely woman protagonists in the novels of Anita Desai, chiefly to explore the feminine psyche in the different stages of a woman's life, particularly the influences that shaped the feminine psyche that makes it conform to rigid patriarchal structures, and to analyse the different thought patterns that emerge from the different experiences portrayed in the novels with reference of the main characters. These thought patterns emerge from the battle-ground of life itself with relation to the main characters in the novels. Even though a lot has been written about women by both men and women] in the past, yet scientific studies on women have shown an increase only in the recent decades. In India most of the studies on women have been undertaken by historians, economists, sociologists, educationists and political scientists besides medical practitioners. Psyche has always been woven into realistic and political writings. Psyche describes the realms of the unconscious and the world of imagination. Among Indian writers in English too. This theme has been dealt with extensively. Nayantara Sahgal, Mulk Raj Anand, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai are name a few writers who have dealt with this theme in their novels in one or the other form.

Anita Desai explores the emotional world of women revealing a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as feminine psyche. She sets herself to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of married women tormented by psychological problems and predicaments. She is concerned with the problems faced by her female protagonists. She portrays the inner conflicts of her characters and also underlines their individuality and quest for freedom. Nature is not merely a matter of heredity. It is also a matter of inclination and tendency of the different combinations of instinct, feeling and thought, of the surfacing or otherwise of the unconscious and the subconscious. The unconscious itself is determined by various factors, dominant among them being a character's relationship with others which itself is governed by the unconscious. But the self, in order to grow towards harmony, to move towards wholeness, needs to attain some measure of distance from the central being to reach a position of being self-critical in order to be able to be analysing the ramifications. In psychological terms it is convenient to talk of the conscious and the sub-conscious layers of the extrovert and the introvert types but in ordinary terms it would be the equivalent of stepping out of oneself. One of the ways to do this is by questioning one's

motive and situations, another by going through the process of recollecting the past. These are not foolproof methods for whether they lead to sanity or insanity, distancing or self-glory and self-pity depends on the initial point - why the person is motivated to go through the past. But no matter in which direction it leads the process is excruciatingly painful and violent. This mechanism then acts more and more actively to face the anxious situation that tends to build up tensions in human minds. Coleman has commented in *Abnormal Psychology and Modern life*, "Strong emotions make maximum energy resources available to the organism for meeting such emergencies".(Coleman: 75) It has been proved that philosophers and writers were the first to discover the 'unconscious'. As Usha Bande expresses it: Freud, during his studies, often maintained that the credit of discovering the unconscious goes to the poets and philosophers before him and that he simply discovered the scientific method by which the unconscious could be studied. (Bande: 24) The normal or abnormal behaviour of a person expresses or reflects conflicts and complexes of a person. These constitute the inner-nature and if it is "suppressed, one gets sick; if it is encouraged it leads to healthy personality"(Bande: 25) When inner nature is suppressed it gives rise to frustrations. This fact has been illuminated by Coleman also: Frustration results when our motives are thwarted either by some obstacle that blocks or impedes our progress towards a desirable goal or by the absence of an appropriate goal. Frustration may be minor or they may be serious threats to our welfare, they may arise from outer or inner sources.(Coleman: 82). In the characters of Desai's novels many internal frustrations arise out of psychological barriers. When these barriers in the form of reality and ethical restraints break down her characters get involved in self-recrimination and a feeling of guilt. Her characters suffer from loneliness which gives rise to insecurity. There is tension in their mind which results in their strained relationships. They react vehemently and emotionally to these situations. Because of feelings of insecurity her characters do suffer and also cause suffering for others. In this connection Coleman has observed : Feelings of insecurity may have widely differing effects on behaviour, but typically they lead to a restriction in activities to fearfulness and apprehension and a failure to participate fully in one's world. (Coleman: 70-72) Such psychological problems leave a restraining effect on their mutual relationship.

The novels of Anita Desai present characters undergoing psycho-logical turbulence arising out of a conflict between reality and illusion that the characters build up for themselves. In psychological terms, this types of psychic nature in called 'semiotics' and 'regression'. There are both kinds of psychic nature in Anita Desai's novels, but mainly 'semiotics' - Maya in *Cry The peacock*, Nirode and Monisha in *Voices In The City*, Nanda Kaul in *Fire On The Mountain*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Sarah in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. All these characters clinging to imagination or belief as they are unable to relate to reality. It is a kind of temporary compromise with the immediate environment. Here in this paper we discuss about the feminine psyche of Monisha in *Voices in the city*.

Voices in the City is "The unforgettable story of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the cross currents of changing social values". It is a feudal family of Kalimpong dominated by the mother with an inferior father who is most of the time drunk; there are four children, two sons and two daughters - Arun, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. The story of the novel begins with the departure of Arun to England for higher studies and Nirode who works in a newspaper office as a simple clerk. His sister Monisha is married to Jiban a middle-rung officer in a Government department with a large joint family, this is a typical middle class family. The younger sister Amla has received training as a commercial artist in Bombay and has come to Calcutta to join an advertisement firm. Father is no more now, mother leads a lonely life because all the children are outside Kalimpong; she gets company of her neighbour, one retired Major Chaddha with whom seemingly she is also having an affair which is much resented by Nirode. Nirode's life as presented in the novel is a succession of failures, from bringing out a magazine called *Voice* to writing of a play, opening a book stall, and even selling spurious antique art pieces. Amla has a short-lived affair with a married artist Dharma and through her the world of the upper class society is shown Monisha's ill-matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility,

and the stress of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband push her to the breaking point and she commits suicide by self-immolation. The novel ends with the funeral of Monisha on arrival of her mother from Kalimpong.

In this novel, Anita Desai has portrayed feminine psyche mainly through the character of Monisha, although there are other women characters also in the novel. Monisha is similar to Maya in that she is also childless, sensitive and a victim of ill-matched marriage. If Maya is lonely in her family because it is a nuclear family with no one except her husband Monisha's family has too many people, since it is a joint family. The over-crowded house makes her uneasy and even though she has a room of her own, literally yet metaphorically she hasn't, for the women of the family just never bother that the daughter-in-law may sometime need privacy. Her sisters-in-law always without any hesitation barge into her room making themselves comfortable on the big bed discussing Monisha's sarees and her blocked fallopian tubes. Her plight increases because sterility is a stigma for a married woman. Through Monisha, Anita Desai has portrayed the psyche of a sensitive intellectual woman who is 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. Because of her intellectual nature she is not much interested in religion even though she reads the Bhagwad Geeta. Several Shlokas from it, have been quoted. Had she been a believer, her anguish and plight would have been reduced but it is not so as she writes 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 - that his husk is a protection from death. Ah yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence, and that, surely, is not a difficult choice (Desai: 1965, 87).

She is in contrast with the average Bengali daughter-in-law as described graphically in the same section, sacrificing her life for the husband and the family confined within the four walls of the house. The life of a woman like Monisha in the given circumstances is never happy and the result is that she burns herself to death. Her impending death by suicide has been poetically described by Anita Desai even before her actual death which comes later in the novel. She yearns for eternal darkness beyond sleep because even sleep may have nightmares. She feels herself totally submerged in darkness, she doesn't want even the stars to which she has referred in the context of what separates her from Jiban's family.

In exact contrast to Monisha is another minor character Sarla who is the wife of Nirode's affluent friend who lives in a large victorian house with the shadows and remembrance of the days of the East India Company. She is also fond of drinks and is described as "a voluptuous porpoise of ebony flesh" having, in words of her husband, "too many admirer...white ones - mainly, and a few that she calls honey-complexion" (Desai: 1965, 34). But Nirode dislikes her and to him "she seemed to belong to the same century as her house, to that class of courtesans who had clung like bracelets, or vampires, to its wealth and leisure and decadence" (Desai: 1965, 34). She may not be like the cabaret girls of the Cry the Peacock but she belongs to that class which believes in the philosophy of 'eat, drink, and be merry.' Monisha's mother also did not have a happy marital life because of her ill-matched marriage. In the eyes of Amla her mother is "the most beautiful woman in the world, and very accomplished. None of us is like her, so polished and balanced and contained like a well-cut jewel" (Desai: 1965, 209). She has refined taste for flowers, music and good food. The father is a kind of sadist deriving pleasure in hurting her. After the husband's death when there is no restriction on her, she becomes free and carries on an affair with a retired Major, Chadha much to Nirode's anger and hatred. Even though Nirode apparently hates his mother yet he too is fascinated by her beauty even in her declining years.

Motherhood is the ultimate objective of the woman and that is why the importance of and craving for children, if male, all the better is feelingly described by the novelist. Anita Desai has explored the psyche of both the childless women, as of Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, of Monisha in *Voices in the City*, and also of women with children, like Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer* and Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*. The interesting thing to note is that Anita Desai has portrayed also the psyche of, "unwomanly" women in the sense that they don't want children. Certainly they are not as "unsexed" as lady Macbeth was.

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