MARITAL DISCORD IN ANITA DESAI'S WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER? AND FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN- A COMPARATIVE STUDY

MRS. NILOFAR RASHID REZA HEAD MISTRESS (JUNIOUR PRIMARY SECTION, I.I.S.J & RESEARCH SCHOLAR)

BIONOTES

Nilofar Rashid Reza is Head Mistress (J.P.S) in I.I.S.J Al-Jubail, Saudi Arabia and is a Research Scholar. Her area of interest is Indian Writing in English. She has published number of papers in journals, presented Workshops and participated in Webinars & Seminars etc. She is an active member in NISA TOASTMASTER CLUB (AL-JUBAIL) and she has qualified up to District level in Toastmaster: DELC in March 2019, and also stood 2nd in DELC 2020 in INTERNATIONAL SPEECH CONTEST. She also has YouTube channel 'EMBRACE YOUR JOURNEY'. You may reach her at nilofar.rashid@yahoo.com

<u>ABSTRACT</u>

Indian literature in English has journeyed a long way to achieve its present glory and grandeur. At present it is enriched by a sizeable number of women writers, acclaimed all over the world. Among these women writers Anita Desai has earned a separate space for her. Marital discord recurs as the theme of the novels of Anita Desai. Her novels with a touch of feminist concern portray the failed marriage relationship which often leads to alienation and loneliness of the characters.

Anita Desai (June 1937), the most significant novelist as a young woman, when she was very seriously writing, or trying to write anyway, it was British literature like Jane Austen, Virginia woolf, D.H.Lawrence, E.M. Foster who influenced her. They are her models in those days. Then she later discovered and really revered the Russian Writers – Chekhov, Dostoevsky above all. Desai is part of new literacy tradition of Indian writing in English, which dates back to the 1930's or 1940's. She explains that this is because that at one time all literature was recited rather than read and that remains the tradition in India. It will rather a strange act to buy a book to read, it is an unusual thing to do. Her new style of writing is also different from many Indian writers, as it is much less conservative than Indian literature has been in the past. She portrays the cultural and social changes that India has undergone as she focuses on the incredible power of family and society and the relationships and the alienation between family members, paying close attention to the trials of women, suppressed by Indian society. The study of isolation experienced by woman in a male dominated society is a significant modern trend. In the Indian society woman are not allowed to play any active role in decision-making. They are ignored or brushed aside. In such situations, Anita Desai tries to focus on the predicament of women in the society.(Critical essays on Anita Desai's fiction- JaydipsinhDodiya.-Man-Woman Relationship In Anita Desai Novels- Twinkle B. Manavar- pg13-15)

She is one of the most powerful contemporary Indian novelists in English. She is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation than with action, experience and achievement. Desai's portrayal of man-woman relationship has been influenced and condition by the existing intricate social situation. She concentrates on the predicament of modern woman in this male- dominated society and her destruction at the altar of marriage. According to Desai, most marriages proves to be unions of compatibility. Men are apt to be rational and matter of fact while woman are sentimental and emotional. Their interests,

their attitudes are different. Naturally they look at things in different ways and react to the same situations differently. She is one of the most perceptive and consistent explorer of the inner life, especially that of Indian woman, convulsed by an acute sense of helplessness in the face of the onslaughts of an unfeeling world and the resultant mental agony.(Marital Disharmony In Anita Desai's Novels- BasavrajNaikar pg-72).

Throughout her novels, short stories and children's literature, Desai often focuses on the dilemma of identity and family relationships usually in context with India's recent social changes. Desai has received numerous literary awards and her work is praised by English professors from Princeton to the University of Hongkong. A sensitive heart and a bold hand synchronize in Desai's work, giving the reader rich reading experiences. Her created characters linger on his the mind, sculpted with substance, even in her shortest short stories. To read Desai is not to be overwhelmed in flowery descriptions, but to be allowed to be observe salient moments of revelation and transformation. Preferring to reveal truth over sentimentality, Desai isolates the details that matter, with critics and admirers comparing her to some of the best modernist writers, including Virginia woolf and T.S.Eliot. Desai's subjects are often seen captive in the walls of the home, or in a confining social conventions. Never claustrophic, Desai's characters domain and inner selves are given distinction and quiet dignity amidst an unvielding world. Having an affinity for both India and the west, Desai has a true familiarity with marginalization and dual ethnicity. Her mother was German and her father was Indian. The biggest difference between Desai's parents and those in her neighborhood is that she and her sisters were encouraged to read the best English literature. Even as a six year old, she knew she would become a writer

"We had a house that was full of books. All of us were great readers. We were always going to the library and the bookshop. When I was taught how to write and read at school I remember I made up my mind that this was that I'd love to do the best and this was the world I was going to occupy. So I started writing little stories in that time. I really never wanted to do anything else. I think it was simply love of books, and the pleasure I found in imagining images within words."

The theme of man-woman relationship in Anita Desai's novels reveals her consummate craftsmanship. Mrs. Desai sincerely broods over the fate and future of modern woman more particularly in male- chauvinistic society and her annihilation at the altar of marriage. The novelist however does not challenge the futility of marriage as an institution but discloses the inner psyche of the characters through their relations.(The Novels Of Anita Desai :A Feminist Perspective, Man-Woman Relationship In The Novels Of Anita Desai Ramesh Kr.Gupta pg-153)

Thus the most common themes in her novels is the complexity of human relationships particularly about the miserable plight of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands, relationships brings characters into alienation, withdrawal loneliness, isolation and lack of communication of her novel's protagonist are alienated from the world, from society from the families, from parents. They are not average people but individuals. When these have to face alienation they become full of tension, worries depression, disappointment, anxiety and fear become their lot. Sita in where shall go this summer? And Nanda Kaul in fire on the mountain are unable to reconcile to alienation and end with a tragic end. The uniqueness of Anita Desai's fiction lies in her treatment of feminine sensibility. She talks of women who question their individual growth. They try to reassess the known in a new context and find a meaning in life. Her female protagonists try to discover meaningfulness in life through the known, they are but different from others. They do not find a proper channel of communication and thus become alienated from their wanderings and reflections finally bring new vistas of understanding, which they haven't. Most of her protagonists are alienated ones. She portrays her characters as individuals facing single handedly (the times of India).

In Where Shall We Go This Summer? Anita Desai chooses marital Discord as the subject matter of this novel and highlights how the inability to lay bare and one's soul and express freely one's fear and anguish result in the snapping of communication between husband and wife. Different attitudes, individual complexes and fear add to this distancing between the husband incorporates the central question in the life of Sita, the leading female character in the novel' we stand for the couple Sita and Raman. If we remove 'this summer' from the title, the question becomes universal and eternal. It is everybody's question – where shall we go in life? The protagonist of this novel is Sita, through whom the novelists tries to portray the psyche of a married woman. Raman and Sita have irreconcilable temperaments and attitudes to life. The ill- assorted couple of Raman and Sita are confronted with the same problem of husband wife discord. Sita represents a world of emotion and feminine sensibility while Raman is a man with an active view of life and the sense of the practical. Sita is a sensitive, nervous and middle aged woman with explosive and emotional reactions to many things that happen to her, she always wants to escape reality and does not to grow up and face the responsibilities of adult life. On the contrary Raman represents the prose of life. He represents sanity, rationality and an acceptance of the norms and values of society. He is unable to understand the violence and passion with which Sita reacts against every incident. His reaction to his wife's frequent outburst is a mixture of puzzlement, weariness, fear and finally a resigned acceptance of her abnormality. He cannot comprehend her bedroom, her frustration with her. In this novel theme of alienation and lack of communication in married life is discussed by writer. Sita finds herself alienated from her husband and children. She remains an ignored personality since childhood. She is the product of broken family. She yearns to have the attention and love of others but her father remains busy with his chelas and patients. Even after marriage, she remains lonely. Her husband also is busy. He fails to fulfill her expectation. As a result there is marital discord and tension between husband and wife. Where shall we go this summer? May be seen as a parable on the inability of human beings to relate with the outer, the individual with society. It is a story of illusions melting away in the cold light of the everyday and the commonplace. It does suggest that a life of complete inwardness is not the elution to the problems of life. Nor is the other extreme of complete conformity and total draining out the individuality and of the imagination of the human being the proper way out of the dilemma. It shows that human happiness consists in harmonizing the opposites of life.

The protagonist Sita tends to cherish her native dreams of a romantic married life and confronts with commonplace realities of life, with severe joints to her expectations. Sitabeing a mature female, carves out a meaningful pattern and adopts various strategies to cope with stressful situations. She is forty years old woman, awaiting the birth of her fifth child. Her experiences as a housewife and mother are jarring and she is in deep anguish. The novelist through the treatment of the journey of Sita in terms of marital relationship forays into the feminine psyche, trapped in the chauvinistic male dominated society. The novel helps us to see the abundant depth of woman's heart as a member, a wife, a victim and never as a heroine. Sita realizes that marital happiness is not possible in her life, and that all her efforts are crushed by the insensitive and cruel, society which is maledominated. She exists among conditions often bordering on despair. She is like Maya of cry, the peacock, highly strung and has high lightened imagination that makes Prof. Tripathiasserts: In possessing more than ordinary organic sensitivity she is younger sister of Maya, the heroine in Cry, the Peacock " Her mother had vanished and her father was always surrounded with the aura of a national leader. She had little or no communication

with her children as a Sita grew up with a morbid notion that she "came into the world motherless." But she dotes on her father like Maya, as her ideal. She live a solitary life and grew up solitary on a desolate, rains altered island when her father died, she was alone. But Raman, the son of her father's friend, became voluntarily in charge of her, as she flatly states," out of pity, out of lust, out of sudden will for adventure, and because it was inevitable -married her." After marriage, Sita suddenly out of a solitary life of girlhood, entered into a conventional placid family. She describes her husband's family thus. She never got used to anyone when they lived in the first years of their married lives, with his family in their age- rotted flat off Queen Road; she had vibrated and throbbed in revolt against their almost sub-human placidity, calmness and sluggishness. The more stolid and still and calm they were, the more she thrummed as frantic with fear and their subhumanity – might swamp her. She behaved provocatively-' It was there that she started smoking, anything that had never been in their household by any woman and even by man. Fire on the mountain IS Desai's another important novel. This novel pictures the sensibility of an Indian wife and her sufferings. Nanda kaul is the protagonist of this novel. It presents the study of the sensibility of a house wife and the trauma of a house wife which takes her towards seclusion. In this novel, Desai has disclosed the true picture of the affected sensibility of a female through her protagonists Nanda Kaul most of the wives can find themselves in the character of Nanda Kaul.

Her novel Fire on the Mountain grapples with the theme of in communication and lack of understanding in marital life. The novel records the story of Nanda Kaul, the vice chancellor 's wife who has chosen the house of top of a mountain in Carignano in the village of Kasuli, as her shelter away from the disturbances of family and society. Life with the vice –chancellor had long ordeal with only the duties and responsibilities of her position without any love attached to it. She is disillusioned with her selfish, infidel husband, who "treated her simply as some useful objects." she played the gracious hostess all the time for the husband, who' wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining-room, entertaining his guests ". In the words of Gopal.N.R," She is so busy raising the family and discharging the duties of mother, housewife and hostess that in the evening of her life she is happy in her seclusion even though it is partly voluntary and partly circumstatianal." Mrs. Desai probes deep into the problematic life of Nanda Kaul, who besides being the wife of vice- chancellor and leading a luxurious life, is satiated by it." outwardly Kauls were an ideal couple to university community but from inside it was all empty, the whole social role and socializing was a mere sham." Her life with her husband was "lacking in composition and harmony."

The psychological seclusion of the lady is echoed by the landscape of the mountain-rocky and barren. Her wish to be lonely and secluded is seen in her apathy to receive her great granddaughter." discharged me, she groaned. I've discharged all my duties". Carignanao offered her the anonymity and escape she longed for. MrinailniSolanki rightly observed:

Her option for total isolation is not related to the spirituality of Indian thought. She does not opt for this isolation willingly,, but circumstances have left no other way out for her. Her long involvement with the people and the affairs of the world gave her neither satisfaction nor a sense of belongingness. Therefore in a bid to survive she opts for withdrawal, for an existence away from the world of messages and visitors"

The novel tells of the falsity which Nanda is forced to. Her conjugal life is not forced to. Her conjugal life was not peaceful. It was not all love and sincerity but the terrible betrayal of her husband prompted her to a life of silence. The children were alien. The graces and glories were a fabrication, to drive the present. Her relation with her husband did not involve her inner 'self'. The novel gives an impression of her happy life with her husband, but the last page of the novel reveals that the whole story was a white lie.

There occurs another failed marital relationship in the novel- the relationship between Raka's mother and excessive drinking father. But the writer has focused on the plight of Nanda Kaul, who is deceived and betrayed by her husband." lack of understanding of the partner's expectations and temperaments is chiefly responsible for the marital discord of Mrs.Kaul "Thus Anita Desai lodges her protest against unhappy married life in the phony world through her female characters.

The novel has the theme of joint family system, so typical of India. Because of stubborn nature of Sita, she refuses to adjust herself to her husband's family. Her husband who is practical man in order toavoid daily bickering and tension moves into a flat. Sita's in-laws are accommodating and considerate but she takes perverse delight in teasing them. In her in-laws family nobody smokes openly but out of spite she starts smoking before the family. Her smoking is symbolic seems to her the enchanted island of miracles and she decides to go there, against the sane advice of Raman, along with her two children Menaka and Karan even during her advanced stage of pregnancy. On the island she expects miracle that never comes because miracles hardly ever comes in real life. They only exist in the fantasy world of children. On the island she broods over the past, fantasying over the childhood and her father who was a god to illiterate islanders. The children get annoyed and are feed up with the primitive life on the island and Menaka asks her father to take them back to Bombay. Raman comes and takes the family and Sita, goes grudgingly. However, by the end of the novel revelation comes to Sita and she accepts the world of reality and becomes mentally prepared for the delivery of her child. Thus the novel ends establishing victory of reason over fantasy.

B.RamachandraRao in Where Shall We Go This Summer?, arises out of the inability of the characters to connect the prose and the passion in their lives . They have lived only in fragments. The novel ends with a defeated and despondent Sita unable to rediscover the passion of life and deciding to accept the prose of life. But the book ends with the implicit comment that this have not been the only ending. It could have turned out otherwise.

Thus Rao finds Where Shall We Go This Summer?, an open ended novel. This the novelist device of not being dogmatic of committed towards a conclusion, rather giving the reader a scope for his own reading and conclusion.(A Critical Study Of The Novels Of Anita Desai-N.R.Gopal pg-40,42)

In India we have polygamy and the Shastras described the duties of a co-wife but in modern times bi-gamy is a crime. But man being polygamous in nature he at times carries on life-long relationship with the other woman. In 'Fire On The Mountain in which Prof. Kaul the vice-chancellor and husband of Nanda Kaul carries on a love affair with Miss. David, the arithmetic teacher. But as she was a Christian he could not dare break social code and marry her. Nanda Kaul the widow of vice- chancellor , is compelled both by choice and circumstances to live in a secluded old bungalow' carignanao' in Kasuli, fiercely guarding her seclusion and privacy, but her insulated life is stirred by the arrival of her great granddaughter, Raka, a girl of seven or eight years, an introvert , sensitive as Nanda herself . She is very much confined to her own self, resenting any intimacy with Nanda. She busies herself rambling through deserted hills and gorges, she is especially attracted towards a burnt house and is preoccupied with the idea of a forest fire.

There is totally marital disharmony between Prof. Kaul and Nanda Kaul. She is no better than a kept. In this case the blame goes to the cowardice of Prof Kaul who just gives lip service to marital life. Outwardly the Kauls were an ideal couple to university community but from inside it was all empty, the whole social role and socializing was a mere sham:

"Not had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen- he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved."

Because of her husband cowardice and selfishness Nanda Kaul had to suffer. She readily discharges her duties towards her family but in doing so loses her individuality and identity. Like Sita of Where Shall we Go This Summer?. Although to lesser degree, Nanda Kaul is not very happy in coping with the large family and unending stream of guests. (A Critical Study of the novels of Anita Desai-N.R.Gopal pg-35-37)

"And her children – the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice-she lived here alone because that was she was forced to do, reduced to doing".(Fire On The Mountain pg-145)

CONCLUSION:

In one form or another, the theme of marital discord dominates the contemporary fiction, may it be of British, American or Indian origin. It is one of the central themes in the works of D.H.Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Raja Rao, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, NayantaraSahgal, Ruth PrawerJhabwala, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Anita Desai and others.

Marital discord, the conflict in married life, is as old as the institution of marriage. Marital discord represents a breakdown in the consensus and co-operation of the married couples. Usually marital discord originates when rivalry develops between the partners by internal and external manifestations like separation, physical violence and vituperation. They drift apart when they are unable to sort out their problems which result in the strain and tension in their relationship. According to C.B.Mamoria," Desertion and divorce are the final tragic denouncements of family disorganizations". (Mamoria, 1960, 384).

Sita regards their soulless existence as a menace to her own marital and conjugal identity and boldly flouts the dehumanizing and de establishing norms and values of society whose strange hold it is difficult to escape. The disintegration of their human identity is emphasized through the recurrent images of prey and predator. Sita says" they are nothing (...) nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals (wswgts,pg-47).

Through Sita, Anita Desai voices the awe of fairing all alone "the ferocious assaults of existence' (TOI:13). The conflict between two polarized temperaments and two discordant viewpoints represented by Sita and Raman, sets up marital discord and conjugal misunderstanding as the let-motif of Desai's novels. The interrogative and inquisitive title of the novel is a pointer to the ennui of Sita's anguished soul.

Her married life is a series of emotional chiaroscuro. She is uncertain of her own self . How could she tell, how decide which half of her life is real and which unreal? Which of her selves was true, which false? All she knew was that there are two periods in her life, each in a direct opposition to the other (...)(153).

Desai's heroines often act violent, but there is a positive change. Sita reconciles herself to her lot. She strikes a balance between her inner self and the outer world, her prosaic self and her poetic sensibility, her individual self and the societal consciousness. Thus Where Shall We Go This Summer? isan answer to temperamental incompatibility and the resultant alienation. Sita's hope for consolation from the island is but a frantic and desperate bid to relieve the boredom and hypocrisy of the bourgeois existence. All she gets from the island is a cold welcome and thus remains an island. In the words of Madhusudan Prasad,(...)it is a memorable piece of fiction which provides us proudly with a panacea for an endemic and existentialist predicament, threatening to assume epidemic proportions in our country'(Prasad 77). It is a psychic turbulence, the very image of poetry which Ezra Pound could have called as intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of

time".(Desai). Unlike the other works of Desai, there is a novel where the quest for identity does not end in death and desolation; it closes with compromise and conciliation.

Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain creates the problems of man-women relationship as basic component parts of uninteresting family life. The novel depicts the agonized cry of Nanda Kaul, an old woman who has too much of the world with her and so longs for calm retired life. Her busy past now appears like "a box of sweets" (fom-45). Nanda Kaulrejoices at least at the outset of her alienated, loveless and affectionless life. She has avowed this after enduring compatible torment and intense experiences of marital life. The lifelong faithfulness conduct of Mr.Kaul to Nanda Kaul and the hypocritical circumstances force her to concede this alienation. This weeding is quite based on physical passion and circumstantial convenience for male. Nanda Kaul becomes a mother of many unwanted, uncared children. She always arranges the dinner table as a house-wife. Externally everything appears to be smooth, but internally Nanda Kaul burns with a fire of frustration. Nanda Kaul is frightfully upset:

The entire weight of the overload past seemed to pour

Into her like liquid cement that immediately set solid

Incarcerating her in its stiff gloom

she sat with her lip tightly set" (fom pg-46)

on the contrary, Mr. Kaul keep his beloved Miss David, a teaching staff. He invites her for badminton parties, drops her back at night, and comes back secretly to his separate bedroom. But Nanda Kaul shows the frozen smile on her face. She looks after the family, his children, servants, and his house with commanding confidence. The situations which she faces, upsets her and she feels to remain a widow. She is anyhow waiting, always waiting with a singular, burning, soul-destroying hatred for her husband to cease living, for the blessed widowhood, the exquisite seclusion without man and children round. In the complete privacy of her sprawling house 'Carignano' Nanda Kaul lives like 'recluse'. 'It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted

And prepared for all her life...and at last she had it

And prepared for all her file...and at last she had

She wanted no one and nothing else.

Whatever else come or happened here

Would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction." (fompg 48)

After her neurotic, busy life at the vice-chancellor's house here 'she had held herself religiously aloof, jealous of this privacy achieved only at the very end of her life.'(fom pg-49)

MrinaliniSolanki rightly observed: 'Her option for total isolation is not related to the spirituality of Indian thought. She does not opt for this isolation willingly, but circumstances have left no other way out for her. Her long involvement with the people and the affairs of the world gave her neither satisfaction nor a sense of belongingness. Therefore, in a bid to survive she opts for withdrawal, for an existence away from the world of messages and visitors.'(solanki.1992 pg30)

R.K. Srivastava has rightly said that' the man -woman relationship becomes more important due to rapid industrialization, growing awareness among woman of their rights and individualities, and the westernization of attitudes and lives of the people.' (The Novels Of Anita Desai; A Feminist Perspective- Man Woman Relationship In The Novels Of Anita Desai pg-169,170,177)

While marriage is extremely important for both men and women in India, it affects a less radical transformation in the life of the male. He continues to live in his natal house, and-ideally least – a man's marriage should not affect his roles as a son or brother. A common proverb states, 'Raising girls is like watering some one's else lawn.' Marriage provides a woman with an acceptable social identity in the same way that initiation into the caste does

so for a man. Marriage is a crucial need for the woman. The traditional responsibility of the woman for child care, looking after others members of the family and her less physical strength make her subordinate to her husband in most of the countries of the world. Family is treated as the institutional structure through which concepts of sex in equality are enforced. The woman's fate is considered to be tied to the family whose fate, in turn, is related to society.

However in recent times the status of women has received considerable attention from the social scientists owing to modernization of the society and female economic participation .The employment of the wife in a professional occupation does empower her with resources and higher levels of prestige which, in turn affect the structure of power in the family.

The status of women in India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Their path is full of roadblocks. The woman have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armored with their talent. They had proven themselves. But in India they are yet to get their dues.

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