

ANITA DESAI'S MANIFESTATIONS OF LOVE

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Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the foremost Indian women writers of fiction in English who covers a wide span of life and a wide variety of subjects in her writings. She has shown a marked interest in the short story as a form of artistic expression and exploration. In a few of her stories she explores love in a very sensitive and sublime level. This paper is an attempt to discuss how Desai presents "Love" in various forms in three of her stories.

Keywords:

Relation;

Compassion;

Sacrifice;

Sublime;

Ecstasy.

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Introduction

Love is the most powerful emotion one can experience. It is so easy to understand love, but at the same time so difficult. Love is an expression of affection, compassion and kindness towards someone else. But the ways in which Love manifests itself on humans or non-humans or objects are inexplicable and unpredictable. No one can explain how and when and on whom the love springs, because it does not manifest the same way in every one. Anita Desai deals with the theme of love in three of her stories "The Accompanist", "Surface Textures", and "Diamond Dust – A Tragedy".

Desai's stories are more like brief skits or episodes, each focusing on a single aspect or issue of life. The intricacy of a single event or thematic unit is explored and its significance is highlighted in a very subtle manner. Her stories are character specific and deal with specific situations and behavioural patterns and explore the nuances of different relationships. Desai tries to introduce a modern psychological vein and projects a sensibility generally not encountered in the other Indo-Anglican writers of fiction (Jena 1989, 29).

"The Accompanist" is about a tanpura player who is emotionally bonded to a famous Ustad. The story unfolds the relationship of absolute reverence and absolute faith between the master Sitar player, the Ustad and his accompanist, the Tanpura player formed instinctively during the very first meeting like love at first sight. The boy, at the age of fifteen, goes to the concert hall to hand over to the master the tanpura his father has made for him. The boy's gaze remains fixed on the master as he feels that his God is sitting in front of him. As the boy walks up to the stage to give the master the tanpura, he sees "greatness in his face, the calm and wisdom and kindness of a true leader." After learning who the boy is, the master fondles his chin and asks if he can play tanpura for him as his tanpura player has not arrived that day. Immediately the boy wishes to deliver not only the tanpura but his whole life into his hands. His words "Take me. . . take me and lead me. Show me how to live. Let me live with you, by you, and help me, be kind to me" (Desai 1978, 67) remain unspoken but which the master has nevertheless heard. Communication is required between couples to express love. But the love Desai presents here is beyond the materialistic levels where no communication is required. It is heard and understood though no words are spoken. The master's words "play for me" are enough to be the answer to

the boy who feels: “. . . with these words he created me, created my life, gave it form and distinction and purpose. It was the moment of my birth and he was both my father and my mother to me.”(Desai 1978, 68)

Thus starts the beautiful relationship between the boy and the master, both playing music together, each absolutely sure about the other. Earlier, the boy was "a dirty, hungry street urchin, knocking about in the lane with other idlers and vagrants." No one cared for him. It is Ustad Rahim Khan who shows him what to do with his life. He owes "everything to him," his "very life to him". The boy becomes the tanpura player for the Ustad. The Ustad becomes everything in his life. They travel all over India and play in every city, in every season. They share their life as well as music:

“Ours is a world formed and defined and enclosed not so much by music, however, as by a human relationship on solid ground level – the relationship of love. Not an abstract quality, like music, or an intellectual one, like art, but a common human quality lived on an everyday level of reality – the quality of love”. (Desai 1978, 59)

The tanpura player does not make much money on these concert tours. He even gets married, but only for the sake of his mother. He seldom visits her. He remembers neither her name nor her face. He believes, the master also has the same attitude to his own family and the rest of the world. True compassion is spontaneous and unconditional. Desai refers to altruism that figures in Buddhism according to which qualities of love and compassion are fundamental.

The Ustad speaks and laughs with others, but always turns his head away when the boy comes close. But, the tanpura player is not hurt; this is the Ustad's way with him, and the tanpura player is used to it. Only he wishes the master would tell him what he plans to play well before the concert begins so that he can prepare himself. "In everything, he led me, I followed. . . For fifteen years now, this has been our way of life."(Desai 1978, 56)

The tanpura player does not have much prominence in the group. He neither follows the raga nor enters into any kind of competition. By running his fingers over the three strings of his tanpura

he merely produces "a kind of drone to fill up any interval in sound, to form a kind of road, or track, for my (his) Ustad. . . so he may not stray from the basic notes of the raga" (Desai 1978, 63). The tanpura player feels very confident and contented: "I maintain I am his true accompanist, certainly his truer friend. He may never smile and nod in approval of me. But he cannot do without me. This is all the reward I need to keep me with him like a shadow." (Desai 1978, 64)

The tanpura player and the Ustad are so weaved together as they play that they never allow their attention to stray but continue to attend to the music: "Our ability to simply shut out all distraction from our minds when we play is a similarity between us of which I am very proud." It is the boy's destiny to play the tanpura for a great Ustad, to sit behind him where he cannot even see him, and play the notes he needs so that "he may not stray from the bounds of his composition gripped by inspiration." He gives the Ustad, quietly and unobtrusively "the materials upon which he works, with which he constructs the great music for which the whole world loves him." (Desai 1978, 68) Anyone can play tanpura for the Ustad, but the Ustad selected only the boy: "But he did not take anyone else, he chose me. He gave me my destiny, my life. Could I have refused him? Does a mortal refuse God. . .? I could not have wished for a finer destiny." Desai employs John Donne's comparison between lovers and compass. "We never diverge: we leave and we arrive together. Is that not love? No marriage was closer." (Desai 1978, 59)

This story is Anita Desai's illustration of the nature of relations that exists between the soul and the God, between the disciple and the master or Guru. Both should love and serve each other, as one. Even Bhagavad-Gita says that there is no difference or distinction between the soul and the God. Both are one, and one cannot live without the other. The disciple placing his head at the Guru's feet or offering himself at His feet may be a gross for outward vision; but internally they both are one and the same. This is the spiritual elevation and attainment of sublimity. It is love that is totally and completely at peace.

"Surface Structures" deals with the quirks of human behaviour, with a touch of humour verging at places on mockery and at places on irony. Harish, a government employee who works in the

office that issues ration cards, suddenly starts behaving in a strange unusual manner. He sits absorbed in his thoughts doing just nothing. Intoxicated by the mere texture of anything, he becomes a worshipper of surfaces. It all begins with his gazing at the melon kept on the dining table as though he had never seen a melon before. All through the meal without eating anything he keeps his eyes fixed on it. He watches the boys "scoop out the icy orange flesh with a fearful expression on his face – as though he were observing cannibals at feast." He is so captivated by the sight of the melon that he runs his fingers over its coarse surface, tenderly, and fondles it delicately. His eyes appear to be "newly opened"(Desai 1978, 35).

At the office, Harish sits staring at the files and they lie unsigned and the people in the queue outside go day after day without rice and sugar and kerosene. He hunts and at last finds a thick book of rules that lies beneath a stack of files and runs "the ball of his thumb across the edge of the pages...tenderly, wonderingly." He gazes at them with "strange devotion" and his eyes seem "to find something of riveting interest and his thumb of tactile wonder" (Desai 1978, 36). As this continues for months and months, he gets dismissed from service.

His wife and sons do not starve during the very first week because of the kindness of their neighbours, for whom Harish is "not human at all, but like a hungry, hunchbacked hyena hunting along the road"(Desai 1978, 37). After a week, the offerings, "although delicious"(Desai 1978, 38) start coming in "small quantities and irregularly" and soon stop altogether throwing the whole family to starve. Finding nothing else to live on, the wife along with the children is compelled to go to her father. Harish feels sorry not to see her leaving but "to see her pack the little silver Kum-Kum box," which he adores for "its cold, raised surface"(Desai 1978, 37), getting carried away. In Anita Desai's fiction,

. . . home is both a prison and a refuge. Those who escape face isolation from their families and society, but those who stay risk suffocation. Family tensions make her character's attempts to transcend domestic lives into personal triumphs or tragedies (Hower 2000, 254).

Soon Harish surrenders government accommodation and starts roaming around, first in the neighbourhood and then in distant parts. Children see him

. . . lying under the pipal tree at the corner of their school compound, staring fixedly at the red gashes cut into the papery bark and, later . . . on the railway platform, sitting against a railing like some tattered beggar, staring across the criss-cross of shining rails.(Desai 1978, 38)

His slow, silent walk gives him "the appearance of sliding rather than walking over the surface of the roads and fields." Not only his eyes and his hands but even his bare feet seem to be "feeling the earth carefully, in search of an interesting surface." The rocky and bare land outside the town is his "especial paradise." The "exquisite roughness" of the rocks, their "perfection in shape and design" keep him "occupied and ecstatic for weeks together." In the river beyond the rock quarries he discovers "the joy of fingering silk smooth stalks and reeds, stems and leaves."(Desai 1978, 39)

In the beginning Harish is treated like a beggar and the shepherd children fail to recognize him – "a man or a water snake." But later the people in those arid parts revere him as a holy Swamiji. They had never seen "a Swami who looked holier, more inhuman than Harish with his matted hair, his blue, starved skin and single-focused eyes". Harish's silence made him "still holier and safer"(Desai 1978, 40). So the people start worshipping him, feeding him, and interpreting his moves in their own fashion. His mere observation of textures slide into madness and he joins India's shabby army of holymen.

"Sensitive and vulnerable characters often struggle to survive against forces that seem fated to overwhelm them" (Hower 2000, 255). "Diamond Dust: A Tragedy" is about Mr. Das's fatal love for his pet dog Diamond. Mr. Das, despite having a full-fledged family consisting of his wife, children and grandchildren, is immensely centered on his pet dog whom he calls Diamond. He develops an unusually intimate relationship with the dog. It becomes a reliever of loneliness, a sounding board, and a soul-mate to him. It is both a "friend" (Desai 2000, 51) and a playmate to him. His eyes would shine with joy and pride as anyone's eyes would on looking at his grandchildren. Mr. Das "would fondle his head, his ears and murmur words of love," romp around with him and lead him on his leash or be led by him. He feeds him on boiled buffalo, much to the displeasure of his wife. He pleads her: ". . . do you want the dog to starve? Do you think a dog such as Diamond can be brought up on bread and milk? How would he grow? How

would he live?” (Desai 2000, 55) A soul mate need not be the life partner. The relationship with a soul mate may be a bliss that exists on a deeper, more spiritual level than any other relationship, inspire the sense of self, and helps in finding one’s passion with confidence.

Mr. Das’s love for his pet is so over-whelming that it becomes an object of hatred and jealousy for his wife and she looks upon him as a villain. Very often she says: “Not even about our own children, not even your first-born son, or your grandchildren, have you made so much of as of that dog”. (Desai 2000, 51) She does not merely observe her husband’s passion from a distance but is obliged to live with it.

His friends and colleagues whom Mr. Das meets daily on their morning walks are astounded to see him “so clearly taken leave of his senses” and it makes them worry. They hardly know how to tell him he is “making a fool of himself.” (Desai 2000, 52) They feel it is beneath his dignity, as a civil servant to play with that “wretched beast”.

Diamond becomes a “full-fledged badmash, a terror to the neighbours”. (Desai 2000, 56) People who are scared of it try to avoid going to Mr. Das’s compound. The postman tries to avoid it by throwing the mail into the hedge. Diamond gets “absolutely insane with rage to see the men in khaki uniforms.” It is not just the postman it detests and chases off its territory, it is anyone at all in uniform—officials of the board of electricity, telephone lines repairmen and even the garbage collectors. Diamond behaves as if “the men were bandits, as if the family treasure was being looted.” When anyone remarks on his dog’s temper, Mr. Das proudly says: “No thief dares approach our house” (Desai 2000, 57). Disgracefully, Diamond’s phobia goes so far that it begins to chase children in their neat uniforms as they make their way to school. The neighbours, though furious, stop short of actually making a report to the police. “Propriety, decorum, standards of behaviour: these had to be maintained. If they failed, what would become of . . . society” (Desai 2000, 59).

Diamond grows up and develops the habit of disappearing for days together. It breaks its chain and goes out for mating bouts with stray bitches. Mr. Das simply goes mad searching everywhere for him, joined in his search by the children because they are the only ones who are

fascinated by the dog and who admire it. Some of the neighbours are moved and can “only feel sorry for him.” When Mr. Das finds the dog, he takes him around to the tap in the courtyard at the back, and washes, soaps, shampoos, rinses, powders, grooms and combs “the creature into a semblance of a domestic pet” (Desai 2000, 60). He beams, bending to fondle the dog’s drooping head: “Oh, he is so sorry, so sorry—he is making up for it in his own sweet way. He cannot help himself...but afterwards he feels so sorry, and then he is so good!” (Desai 2000, 61) He is so concerned about its health that he even slips vitamin pills down its throat. Cressida Connolly feels, “Diamond Dust” is an absurd story; Desai’s genius is in capturing life’s absurdity with benign and understated wit” (Connolly 2000, 56).

But when the season comes nothing holds Diamond back. One day, in November, when the gate is opened for the man to bring in the gas cylinder, Diamond leaps out of the gate rattling himself free of the chain and Mr. Das’s search continues. The neighbours harden their hearts against the pitiful sight of him: “. . . limping through the dust in search of his diamond, like some forlorn lover whose beloved has scorned him and departed with another, but who has not abandoned his bitter, desperate hope”.(Desai 2000, 60) Mr. Das keeps on saying: “Diamond is missing, I can’t find Diamond”.(Desai 2000, 61) His wife is very much annoyed with his behaviour and counsels grimly: “Give him up before this search kills you.”(Desai 2000, 63) Her words prove to be prophetic and that is exactly what happens.

Conclusion:

Love need not be always biological; it is a positive approach in the right way; it is paying attention and devoting time; a commitment to whom one loves; it is more a mystical ecstasy that lasts for a lifetime. Desai deals super-fine aspects of life with a microscopic vision. She presents that any love—whether of man or woman, bird or beast demands the same kind of sacrifice. The tanpura player at least finds his happiness in his master, but Harish becomes no man, and Mr. Das loses his life entirely. But the sufferings their families undergo are common; the inevitable unhappiness becomes the lot of their wives.

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