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## ANITA DESAI'S PERSPECTIVE OF MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN HER NOVELS

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The most prominent theme that the novels of Anita Desai carry is the relationship between a man and a woman. She beautifully uses her artistry to explore this theme in all possible directions. While depicting the relationship, she not only gives voice to the feminine cause, but also presents it realistically, though, in a silent manner. She presents the picture of modern woman in the context of her relations with man in various situations and circumstances. She is neither for nor against the institution of marriage, yet, at the same time she throws light on the limitations of such institution.

Most of her themes are based on the unfriendly and cold relationship between husband and wife resulting in traumatic situations, especially for wives. Nearly all of her female protagonists are the victims of such situations and circumstances; sometimes struggling to oppose such situations while at others trying to adjust with them in order to get over them. She emphasizes not to idealize but to depict the reality. She does not convey her objective expressly while depicting such themes, but makes her readers to contemplate and define the issues in their own terms. Although in some of her works her mode of depiction hints at what she wishes to convey but never does so in its entirety. This also reflects her psychological approach towards this subject. "In Desai's novels most marriages are proved to be unions of incompatibility"(Kaskari 1). Women have been shown to be treated as second grade human beings. However, questions such as whether such treatment is in line with usual human parameters, or whether such treatment is the result of women being the victims of their own complexes and image fixation have been left unanswered. These are the questions which are left to the readers to answer. Purview of Anita Desai's subject matter excludes such explanations. She confines herself to unadulterated characterization of the circumstances rather than adding opinions to it.

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Her women protagonists are shown to struggle due to their perceived sense of subjugation and denial of their own rights and their own psychological limitations. The domestic rights are subject to the mutual understanding of husband and wife. They often lack such understanding and differ in their tastes and likings. Consequently, they behave and react to the circumstances differently. The differences bring in conflicts which affect the mental state and the attitude. These behavioral differences are depicted to be responsible for depression and suffering of women protagonists.

It is a general conception that men are more independent in their outlook in comparison to women and hence, in many matters, women have perpetual dependence on men. Anita suggests that, against this accepted role in the conjugal relationship, an independent outlook assumed by the women is responsible for most of their domestic and individual sufferings. The attitude impels women to claim larger space from their spouses and serve their own interests. Women seek undue emotional favors from their counterparts to feel more secured and protected, which generally does not take place. In such situations, they fall prey to dissatisfaction and depression. They hold their husbands responsible for not paying enough attention to them. Their own misconceptions about their counterparts are generally the cause of their mental agony.

Her depiction of relationship between a man and a woman is based upon the existing social circumstances. Male domination in the society has frequently been referred to in her novels. However, it is woman who imposes this dominance upon herself. Anita has rarely projected women struggle for her rights. She rather suggests that women impose their circumstances upon themselves and enslave themselves of such self imposed state.

She focuses on 'women' and concentrates on portraying her feminine characters, situations, circumstances, psychic needs and struggles. In spite of being a woman herself, Anita is impartial and does not accord her favor to them. She only attempts to present the uncomfortable situation of women in her family life, especially in her married life. The so-called traditional concept of 'marriage' is found broken in her novels. Traditionally the marriages are supposed to be physical and spiritual fusion of two sexes – man and woman. However, in her novels most of these marriages prove to be ill-assorted. "Their incompatibilities are due to lack of mutual understanding; due to difference in their ideologies; due to difference in their behavioral approaches"(Kaskari 1). It is generally assumed that man has a more rational thought process as compared with his counterpart –

woman, who is generally emotional and sentimental in her thought process. Consequently, their approaches and reactions to different situations of life bear a great difference which is instrumental in shaping their psyche.

Generally, woman is expected to adjust to the situations to bridge this gap. She is expected to mechanically cast herself into any mould. However, when she finds herself unable to put up to such circumstances, she seeks emotional support from the outer world which she generally fails to get. As a result, she feels alienated. Such alienation has been the theme of most of the novels of Anita Desai and she beautifully depicts it through her various characters. These characters have been shown as individuals “facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence”(Kaskari 1). This is why most of her characters are abnormally sensitive and dwell in an atmosphere of dream and imagination, detached from the practical world. They live most of their part as Hamlet- thinking, thinking and too much thinking without having any practical gains. They contemplate to seek meaning in their existence knowing that their exercise is futile.

In her novel *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita portrays the consequences of conjugal relationship between two very different people. Maya takes things at emotional level, while Gautama considers them practically on the rational basis. Maya seeks in vain what a wife generally expects from her husband in the moments of crisis - the emotional support from Gautama.

Through *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai depicts the lives of three siblings Monisha, Nirode and Amla who face their respective fates. Nirode has a very negative view of man-woman relationship. He is obsessed with the intimacy of his mother with Mr Chadha which disturbs him perpetually. Monisha’s relations with her husband Jiban are not cordial. Their tastes and temperaments are not in coherence with each other. They have conflicting views on liberalism vs. conventionalism. Monisha represents modern age and accordingly her views are liberal, while Jiban belongs to conventional setup and has views shaped up accordingly. He searches a orthodox woman in his wife. On the other hand, Monisha can’t suppress being a liberal woman and feels suffocated in such a orthodox atmosphere. She feels as if she is deprived of her right to freedom and privacy.

Raman and Sita in the novel *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* too do not enjoy a happy married life. Sita’s relationship with her husband Raman is not adequately compatible. Being busy with his work, her husband is unable to spend enough time with Sita and seems to be quite indifferent to her, like Gautama of the *Cry, the Peacock*. Sita and Raman have very

different temperaments and outlook towards life. She always longs for romantic married life, but domestic responsibilities turn the romantic dream into a harsh reality.

We find further insight into relationship between a man and a woman in the novel *Clear Light of the Day* also. Tara and her husband Bakul do not share a very happy relationship. Bakul's dominion over the family can be comprehended because it is full of pragmatism and worldly wisdom. Such attitude cannot be entirely criticized as it helps Tara to become a woman belonging to the modern world. She enjoys independence though only under Bakul's shadow. Initially, their relationship is a little strained, but Tara, with maturity and understanding, puts up with Bakul's viewpoints.

Anita Desai presents a very different view on man-woman relationship in the novel *In Custody*. It is the story of an ill-matched pair. Sarla, a dull and disinterested lady, who stands nowhere compared to her counterpart, is married to Deven, a self-sufficient man of clear vision and positive attitude and a lecturer in Hindi. Their attitudes and temperaments are quite opposed to one another and hence, Deven and Sarla are not able to get along happily as husband and wife. Their relationship bears some eccentricities and consequently the two do not share a harmonious relationship.

*Fasting, Feasting* is a story of mixed bag of man-woman relationship. This novel has all the shades of a conjugal relationship. The father and the mother of the protagonist Uma have such a strong bonding that together they come to have a same identity. Then there is Uma who remains spinster though two failed attempts of her parents to marry her off. She does not suit to the traditional definition of woman in terms of Indian context. She is simple, clumsy and ordinary in her studies. Uma's inability to find a suitable husband results in Uma's alienation in the orthodox Indian family. Uma's sister Aruna is just opposite to her. She is quick, energetic and lively and outshines in all her activities. Aruna with her wit and wisdom manages to find a rich and handsome man for herself as husband. Aruna not only has full supremacy over her husband but she also rules on her in laws.

*Fire on the Mountain* is a perfect tragedy of a conjugal relationship which contains "the nobility of character. A very different aspect of the man-woman relationship has been depicted in the novel. Nanda, being tired of her domestic responsibilities, leaves her house to seek solace in Carignano. A long devotion to her household responsibilities – sincerely taking care of her husband and children - brings nothing to her but the isolation. Nanda's relationship with her husband, Prof. Kaul was not cordial. She was not happy with him. She

took the conjugal relationship as her responsibility towards her family. She, during her prime days, felt neglected by her husband. He had amorous relationship with another woman. In the eyes of the society, the relationship between Nanda and Prof. Kaul were harmonious. They were known as an ideal couple. In reality, there was a complete absence of mutual respect and had lost any emotional connect.

The tension of adjustment in marriage is also one of the themes in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. The marriage of Adit and Sarah and the marriage of Samar and Bella are the examples of such disharmonious marriages. The disharmony comes in their marriages because of their associations with alien culture. The problem in their marriages is less personal and it's more about fear of alienation from their own people.

Thus, it is clear that man-woman relationship seems to be of particular interest to Anita as in most of her early novels she wrote on this theme. Her treatment of man-woman relationship is largely the result of her sharp psychological insight into the domestic as well as personal lives of couples in India. Her observations have an astute measure of reality. Her understanding of urban life is clearly discernible from her works. She knits her plots around the predicament of modern woman in the context of male dominated society. She vividly describes how woman ruins herself at the altar of her marriage. Nearly all of her characters pass through frustration and consequently they suffer isolation, distress and monotony. All such relationships between man and woman show both negative consequences as well as positive consequences depending upon how they shape up. Mutual understanding, trust, grace, love, tolerance and care are factors that decide the fate of a marriage. In the novels of Anita Desai, we find some of these traits are lacking on the part of either wife or husband or both. These shortcomings become the cause of failures. Sometimes only impressions of such defect carve great impact on the minds of the protagonists who are yet to marry such as Nirode. "All marriages in Desai's novels are more or less business transaction. A marriageable daughter is handed over to the male-partner without considering the delicacy of her mind and feelings. She has to fulfill either the parents' responsibilities or the relatives' demands with different intentions"(Gupta 156).

She seems to bring forth the idea that woman is never treated at par with the man in the society. However, this view cannot be advocated as it is not a universal phenomenon but confined only limited cases. Living harmoniously and keeping the whole family in unison is a joint responsibility of both the husband and the wife. They are like the two wheels of a cart

and efforts of both are required for the cart to go on. Both need to be treated with mutual respect, dignity as well as authority. Communication is the backbone of all relationships between human beings especially between husband and wife and its lack results in what we see in Anita Desai's novels.

Marriage is not game but a serious affair of life. It affects the whole lives of people involved. It needs to be taken up seriously and not merely be observed as a formal social obligation. The aim of such union is to create a relationship not only at physical level but far deeper at emotional level as well. Any imbalance in the relationship results in highly chaotic situations which not only affect the lives of the two people involved but also that of many more related. A casual, indifferent or a negligent attitude can sabotage the relationship and result in a lot of suffering. Incompatible marriages generally result in mutual conflicts, hopelessness, despair, loneliness, separation, rift and lead the couple nowhere. Although female plays a pivotal role in keeping the family together, least attention is paid to her point of view. If the marriage goes on well the whole family collectively takes the credit, but in case it falters, woman is held responsible in most of the cases. However, the fact is that both partners are responsible for the success as well as the failure.

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