

Literature's Need to the Non-Literary Students: A Case Study of Anita Desai

Abstract

In today's world the predicament of a student has undergone a sea change owing to the reduction of humanity. Literature is the mirror of society, it reflects the social reality. If a student of professional studies reads a novel, he does not only understand the fictional world but through the microcosm of the fictional world he understands the macrocosm of the human world. The paper, here, therefore, makes a plea for a structured opportunity being given to the students of non-literary background for inclusion of the study of fiction as a compulsory part of their curriculum. To elucidate the point further a case study of Anita Desai, one of the celebrated modern writers in English has been made. Most of the problems of modern mechanized, industrialized life emerge because of huge gap between the professional and private life, Gautama, Jiban and Raman of Anita Desai's novels are the representatives of such life. They fail to provide physical, emotional, romantic, spiritual fulfillment to their wives. Thus exposure to such problems to a student of engineering will make them prepare better for life and its complexities.

The paper will focus on this aspect of Anita Desai making a case study of her two novels: *Cry, the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. This paper will have three divisions: (i) Anita Desai's novels: Depiction of Reality of life (ii) Study of the characters of Gautama and Jiban (iii) A case study of *Cry, the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*.

Keywords: Literature, Novel.

Introduction

Literature reflects not only the social reality but also shapes the complex ways in which men and women organize themselves, their interpersonal relationships and their perception of the socio-cultural reality of all the literary forms. The novel is the readiest and most acceptable way of embodying experiences and ideas in the context of time. That is why in order to have a peep into the Indian society; we have to go through the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Anita Desai and so on. The genre of the novel has for long been considered as an effective medium for conveying thoughts, feelings and experiences of a writer. Walter Allen sees the novel as "a walking model of life." (Lubbock 117) Anita Desai is one of the literary luminaries of the contemporary fiction writing in Indian English. Her novels are certainly presentation of social realities from a psychological perspective.

In *Cry, the Peacock* Anita Desai shows how the dull, unemotional, rough, insensitive nature of the husband, Gautama makes the wife, Maya feel alienated and exiled. The story revolves around the hypersensitive protagonist Maya, an Indian woman who fully insulates herself from the world of her husband. Maya and Gautama, the incompatible couple are complex opposites. Maya is a poetic image, Gautama, a materialistic counterpart. Gautama is a creature of commercial world and Maya, a product of dream world. Gautama is like Douglas in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* and Mr. Clinton in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams* pragmatic and rational. A prosperous advocate, too much engrossed in his own vocational affairs, he finds himself incompetent in making a subtle marital chord with his spouse. Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Kamala Markandaya also deal primarily with man- woman relationship in *Heat and Dust* and in *The Coffer Dams* respectively. In both the novels the heroes have a practical bent of mind whereas the heroines are creatures of emotions. When Maya's pet dog, Toto, dies Gautama shows more concern with a cup of tea considering a pet dog insignificant and replaceable. Gautama tries to comfort her 'It is all over' he said, 'come and drink your tea, and stop

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crying. You mustn't cry.' Gautama unknowingly hurts her sentiments as he is unable to comprehend the value of her emotional attachment, and left Maya knitting a cocoon of loneliness around her. Maya, like a haunted protagonist in her bereavement scrutinizes her, she cries out:

And how, seeing me bereaved, seeing tears, on my face and my pet gone, 'You need a cup of tea,' he said. Yes, I cried, yes, it his hardness- no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and, talking, reveal myself. It is that- my loneliness in this house. (Desai 28)

Throughout the novel, the protagonist Maya is exasperated by the inconsiderate, detached behaviour of her husband which finally leads a deep gulf between the two. Gautama fails to feel the intensity of Maya's innermost craving, the pathetic cry of her anguished soul. She cannot compromise with thoughts of Gautama. Maya muses over her husband's lack of understanding, his incapability to love her, and once in a fit of despair and acute agony, she bursts out,

Oh, you know nothing, understand nothing'.... 'Nor will you ever understand. You know nothing of me- and of how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you,'.... 'you've never loved. And you don't love me.... (Desai 112)

Maya's persistent demands for 'contact, relationship, communion' cannot be termed as 'oral erotic.' For her it simply means a flight from 'the embrace of protection to embrace of love.' There are moments when she shows an almost aggressive urge for sexual union with Gautama. But, asleep or awake, Gautama is a far-off figure, who cannot be one with her in her world of senses. In the very beginning of the novel Maya can be seen in a hypersensitive and highly disturbed state of mind reacting to the untimely death of her pet dog. She rushes to 'the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes,' but her husband does not seem to be disturbed. An everwidening gap in communication between Gautama and his wife Maya is felt throughout the novel. Maya feels exiled mainly due to Gautama's philosophical detachment, his imperviousness to the 'beautiful yet tremulous' beauty of the natural world and his gross unconcern over the 'basics in life.' But she is married to such a person who is a lawyer by profession, he believes in logic and action, for him emotions, feelings and love is of no value. He, most of the time, is busy with his works, he does not understand the feelings and sentiments of his wife Maya. Maya does not get spiritual, emotional, romantic and physical fulfillment from him.

The woman in Maya is craving for love; the man in Gautama is contented with his own philosophy of life and does not understand the language of love. Maya a born artist lives a life of pure overwhelming sensation in the company of flowers and fauna. Maya has a romantic love for the beautiful, colourful and sensuous objects. Gautama, an 'intellectual reed' was no romantic and completely lacks aesthetic sense. He cannot even distinguish the smell of petunia from the

smell of lemons. Gautama believes in the preaching of *Gita*. His motto is: "He who, controlling the senses of the mind, follows without attachment the path of action with his organs of action, he is esteemed." (Desai 28)

Gautama, while working at his paper is totally absorbed in his business world even oblivious to the 'soft willing body or the lonely wanting mind.' Gautama, the husband has no contact with sensations, and emotions. Maya finds herself dissatisfied with her present life; she goes into exile due to this. Gautama feels that she must have a power of self control. She thinks of her past, her childhood, her upbringing and also the prediction of the astrologer who told Maya that after the four years of her marriage either she or her husband will die. She is disturbed 'Who knows which one to perish? Perish must one.' Maya does not want to die, she thinks Gautama does not love life, he is busy in his work all the time, and she thinks he must die not she. She thinks Gautama is very indifferent to her, he is not involved: 'Could death disturb him then?'

The moon appears to Maya like: ". . . a great multifoliate rose, waxen white, virginal, chaste and absolutely white, casting a light that was holy in its purity, a soft suffusing glow of its chastity, casting its reflection upon the night with a vast, tender mother love." (Bande 58) Suddenly, Gautama comes between Maya and her worshipped moon, she chooses to punish him. Gautama dies after being pushed off the parapet by his wife Maya, the question arises in the mind is why does an Indian woman Maya do so. An Indian woman is generally seen as the worshipper of her husband. Maya either challenges the patriarchal society or she tries to come out of her fear and suffocation. She wants to get a solution. Psychologists agree that one cannot live with such horror. Maya externalises her trouble. She projects her self-hate on her husband Gautama. Self-preservation is her main and primary instinct. She convinces that he does not enjoy life, he does not love life, and he has hurt her neurotic pride by not accepting her love. In order to subdue her inner turmoil, tension, Maya kills her husband Gautama in a vindictive rage.

As far as Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is concerned, in this novel also the same story can be seen. After the death of her father Sita needs a psychological prop in order to feel safe and secure. Raman is the only person to help her in coming out of her shocking alienation after her father's death. Raman marries Sita out of pity, out of lust, out of a sudden will for adventure. Their relationship was based on the 'deal'- she will be an obliging wife; and Raman will honour her self- image for her lovable qualities. Raman has his own compulsions to deal with. He marries Sita out of pity. When this initial stage of lust and pity wears off, Raman finds his mundane activities more fascinating and fulfilling. He is an expansive person who wants mastery over life. Raman shifts his energies towards his business. By nature he is not aggressive but a 'perfectionist.' He has set his standards and must strictly adhere to them. He is meticulous and punctilious in fulfilling his obligations. According to

Horney, a perfectionist achieves 'behavioristic perfection' and he insists upon others 'living up to his standards of perfection and despises them for failing to do so.' Raman, therefore, cannot tolerate lack of control shown by Sita. He is fair, just and dutiful, so Sita should also be fair to him. He cannot understand her rebelliousness. Their contradictory drives drag them apart, making it difficult for each to comprehend the motives of the other

Erich Fromm says that the feeling of love and shared work helps an individual to unite himself with other person, in this condition an individual can think of ending his isolation. Raman does not understand Sita's nature and self-effacing drives, he does not reject her capacity for love and surrender, it damages, injures her self-image. She disturbs her husband Raman by her attitude and behaviour, and takes enjoy in teasing him. It provides her victory. Sita shows 'psychic fragmentation or compartmentalization' which is a disintegrating process. Raman's failure to recognize Sita's self-effacing drives and honour her capacity for surrender and love injures her self- image. Her hopes of getting love are frustrated. She tells him once: "I thought I could live with you and travel alone- mentally, emotionally. But, after that day, that wasn't enough. I had to stay whole, I *had* to." (Bande 111)

Sita, a sensitive and highly emotional woman and Raman, a practical businessman, between them can be seen irreconcilable temperaments and two diametrically opposite view points. Raman is a replica of Gautama. He is brisk and precise in dealing with the business of life. Raman represents sanity, rationality, and an acceptance of the norms and the values of society. He is a typical conformist. Raman's reaction to his wife's frequent emotional outbursts is a mixture of puzzlement, wariness, fear and finally a resigned acceptance of her abnormality. On the other hand, Sita like Maya is an over sensitive woman. Raman was puzzled when Sita told him she was pregnant with a quite paranoiac show of rage, fear and revolt. He stared at her with distaste and complains that a woman now in her forties, graying, aging should not behave with such a total lack of control.

Sita turns uncomfortable. She has started smoking bitterly. Raman and Sita are ill matched. Raman like Gautama of *Cry, the Peacock* is heedless to the emotions of his sentimental wife. He represents the prose of life and Sita the poetry of life. Her husband fails to understand her sensitiveness and to comprehend how or why or with what she gets bored. Ramchandra Rao says:

Raman, the husband of Sita, represents the prose of life. Like Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock*, Raman is unable to understand the violence and the passion with which Sita reacts against every incident. Unlike the legendary Rama and Sita, the couples do not represent an ideal husband-wife relationship. In fact the names of the characters ironically suggest the complete lack of harmony in the lives of these characters. Names generally have some significance in the works of Mrs. Desai. (Rao 54)

Therefore, it can be said that no true communication develops between the couples and due to the lack of mutual understanding dissonance prevails. The husbands are logical, theoretical and 'shut' whilst the wives, women of immediacies and epiphanies, are warm intuitive and 'open'. Love, the spinal cord of a conjugal relation, completely lacks between the couples. The inner spiritual contact between the couples fails to click. The difference between the sensibility of 'the creature of intellect' and the 'product of instinct' becomes an unavoidable obstacle in their way of life. Their incompatible temperament is an inevitable barrier in their warm relationship. And it would not be out of place to mention here that on the basis of the above discussion, that the study of a novel can be made a compulsory component in the curriculum of engineering students owing to the two basic reasons: (I) Novel teaching is basically discussion-centred teaching. Therefore, more and more participation of students on the problems of life can be invited. (II) Teaching of a novel may induce interest in students for further study of novel. For example, the problems like unsuccessful married life, communication gap between the couple, alienation and exile of the female protagonists as presented in the novels of Anita Desai are directly or indirectly related to a student of engineering. Therefore, with the existing courses of engineering they need to have an exposure to the world of literature which not only offer problems of life but also suggests some value oriented solutions.

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