

Study of the Women's Quest for Self in the Selected Stories of Anita Desai

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Abstract

In the field of Indian English Literature, many writers test their writing skills, but Anita Desai secures her permanent position in the list of outstanding Indian English writers. Anita Desai uses her skills perfectly in presenting the inner life of her characters. The threads of feminism are seen in her works. Her stories deal with the different issues related to women. Besides, being a part of the European culture, she still has confidence and ability to read Indian minds/This research paper intends to explore the concept of personal identity and individualism in the selected works of Anita Desai. Her contemporary writers also try to bring into limelight the personal need of Indian women to acquire her respectable status in the Indian society. But none of them beat Anita Desai in studying the inner mind and psychology of Indian women protagonists in the stories. The aim of the paper is to probe the life of women that belongs to different background. Anita Desai puts forward her thinking through her characters. She strongly champions the women who give utmost importance to their personal space.

Keywords: Self Identity, freedom, oppression, Indian women, spiritualism, quest

Introduction

The writer who has earned towering popularity both in India and overseas is Anita Desai. She is one of the prominent writers who contributed significantly in giving voice to the women's problems. She presents the people of the modern age in her writings. She was born as Anita Mazumdar on 24 June 1937 at Mussoorie. Her mother, Toni Nime was German and her father D.N.Mazumdar belongs to Bengali community. Anita Desai's modern upbringing shapes her modern views and thinking. She was raised by her parents in an Indian environment. Mixed parentage has given her immense understanding about the European and Indian environment. She inherited modern thinking from her parents. Inter-racial marriages are considered as taboo in our Indian society but still they enter into this type of marriage. Anita Desai becomes multilingual as she speaks Bengali, German, Hindi and English. She completed her education from the university of Delhi. She finds her love in man named as Ashvin Desai. She is the mother of four children. She started her writing career in 1960s. The conflicts and issues related to women during the 1960s is clearly visible in her writings. She received many literary awards for her contribution in the world of Indian English Literature. The Sahitya Akademi Award; Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. Padma Bhushan; Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize are some of the notable literary awards that have been won by her. She really deserves these awards. The notable short story collections of Anita Desai are-

1. Games at Twilight (1978)
2. Diamond Dust and other Stories (2000)

Anita Desai's short stories create a familiar world to her readers. Readers find strong appealing messages in her stories. Anita Desai's personality and attitude is clearly visible through the portrayal of her characters. Each story is chiefly concerned with the theme of individualism and personal identity. Melwani, Murli Das comments about Anita Desai's short stories (2009:119) "Although atmosphere forms such a strong presence in these stories yet its raison d'être is the individual, or the personality it interacts with, illuminates, shapes, creates. Anita Desai's first concern is the individual". She explains her theory of personal space and need of women's quest for selfhood through her writing skills.

Aim of the Study

The present research paper focuses on the demands of modern woman in the contemporary Indian society. The paper studies the self-effacing role of female characters in the selected stories of Anita Desai.

The period after the 1960s focuses more on women's need for their freedom, self-identity etc. The year 1960s makes Indian women to brood over their situation at their homes. Being a writer of 1960s, Anita Desai also deals with issues that raise the position of Indian women. Singh Nripendra writes about Anita Desai (2007:74) "Anita Desai, therefore, despite her half Indian half European descent, presents a feminism which is concerned with the moral upliftment of women not constrained by tradition but liberated to add her mite to make her life and of those around her happy, normal and free in the real responsible sense of the term". Anita Desai is basically interested in studying the social role of Indian women. She also knows that our conservative Indian environment always expects the docile attitude from the Indian women. If they fail to fulfill the demands of the patriarchal Indian society, they receive negative treatment in return. Anita Desai tries to understand the psychology of Indian women. She is not partial like Shashi Deshpande. As Shashi Deshpande never seems to be interested in giving identity and names to her female characters. But Anita Desai gives her female characters, a particular identity. They also play the role of daughter, wife and mother in her short stories, but they have their individual identity also. Anita Desai presents various women characters who have their personal identity in stories *The Farewell Party*; *Scholar and Gypsy*; *The Roof top Dwellers*; *The Artist's Life* etc.

In 'The Farewell Party' Anita Desai creates women character Mrs. Raman as symbol of virtue and kindness. Anita Desai describes the positive qualities of Indian women by portraying the character of Mrs. Raman. Mrs. Raman holds a respectable position in society. When her husband has been transferred to some other place, all people in their surroundings weep for them. Mrs. Raman creates a unique place for herself in the mind and heart of her neighbours. Raman family throws a farewell party. All their neighbours are attendant to their party. Most of them feel belittled because they think that they never meet Ramans after the farewell party. Desai Anita writes in the story entitled "The Farewell Party" (2008:291) "There was about it exactly that kind of sentimental euphoria that is generated at a ship-board party, the one given on the last night before the end of the voyage". Through the character of Mrs. Raman, Anita Desai tries to show that some Indian women enjoy their personal identity despite being the wife of rich person. Mrs. Raman belongs to good and rich family, but she makes efforts to create her separate identity for herself through her lively nature. Anita Desai gives Mrs. Raman's qualities like friendly, gregarious and exuberant in this story.

Anita Desai presents another women character who craves for her personal identity and happiness in story *Scholar and Gypsy*. Being a part of

European culture, Anita Desai also loves to portray the inner minds of westerner woman. She seeks to probe the mind of both the European and Indian women.

Anita Desai shows resemblance to Ruth Praver Jhabvala in depicting both European and Indian women characters in their writings. The protagonist Pat in 'Scholar and Gypsy' visits India with her husband David. But her visit to India brings disappointment, frustration and anxiety to her. She searches for complete happiness which Indian cities like Delhi and Bombay fail to provide her. In this connection, the comments of Verma M.R. and Agrawal K.A. about the American woman Pat are worthy (2002:190) "She, in fact, comes of an American farmer family and loves to be free, unfettered and unchained by bonds of any sort. The environs of Delhi and Bombay appear to her as suffocating, teasing and nauseating." Finally she finds mental solace and happiness in Manali in Kullu Valley. The environment of Manali suits her. The hippies deviates her attention completely. She desires to become a monk. But her husband revolts against her decision of becoming a monk. For the protagonist Pat, the quest for her personal identity weighs more than her marriage. She considered David as the greatest hindrance in her way. So she decides to behave like the modern urban lady and finally deserted David. She is completely determined to achieve her aim in her life. Desai Anita writes in the story to show the self-realization of pat (2008:333) She had found a place for herself in the commune at Nasogi. It was what she was meant for, she realized - not going to parties with David, but to live with other men and women who shared her beliefs". Anita Desai has drawn the character sketch of American woman to show that she is interested not only in reading the minds of Indian women, but she also has sympathy with American women also. She also points out that condition of both Indian and American women is similar in some ways. When women from both East and West search for their personal identity, they receive little or no support from their partners. Men always refuse to surrender to the independent nature of women. In the end, most of them drift apart forever. They head away in different directions in their life. Anita Desai shows through this story that she has liking for both Eastern and Western culture. She gives importance to quest for self.

Anita Desai studies another women character in her short story. "The Rooftop Dwellers". Tracing the life of the single working women in metropolitan cities is the main objective of Anita Desai in this story. She studies the life of the single working woman Moyna in the story- 'The Rooftop Dwellers'. She wants to establish her own personal space in our patriarchal social structure. Moyna is interested in working in a literary journal. She aspires to work in the big metropolitan city like Delhi. She rejects and strongly condemns old-traditions of Indian society. She dreams to go ahead of her predecessor. Desai Anita describes the strong will of the protagonist Moyna in the story (2008:157) "But such was her determination to make her new life as a

working woman in the metropolis succeed, and such was her unexpected, unforeseen capacity for adjustment, that after a month or so the minimalism became no longer privation and a challenge but simply a way of life". She differs from other women as she wants to control her life according to her will. She creates enthusiasm for Indian women so that they should come out from their traditional role. But at the same time, Anita Desai also realizes the sufferings of single working women. She highlights the agonies of the protagonist Moyna that how she makes attempt to win her personal identity. The outdated social customs of the Indian society increases difficulty for Indian women. The cruel customs create obstacles in the progress of the Indian women. But the protagonist Moyna is never afraid of any obstacles and still desires for her individuality. She paved the way for those Indian women who try to free themselves from the clutches of the old Indian traditions. Anita Desai criticizes the Indian society for their dual faces. She discusses that on one side, we favour women's liberation movements but on the other side we create problems for independent women so that they kneel their legs and forget about their identity. Anita Desai feels great delight in portraying bold women characters. The women's interest should be promoted becomes her main concern. She shows the way to the modern Indian women to get their own space. The ultimate goal of the protagonist Moyna is to detach herself completely from the outdated Indian customs. The journey of Moyna from province to Delhi is perfectly presented by Anita Desai in this story. She only believes in fulfilling her dreams. She makes modern Indian women to ponder over their hidden ambitions and desires. She also knows that fulfilling personal dreams in the patriarchal society is quite difficult but not impossible.

Readers meet another woman character Tara in the same story with traits similar to Moyna. Tara also rebels against the traditional Indian structure. Anita Desai describes Tara's strong will of attaining personal identity in the following quotes (2008:169) "She had been working in non-government organizations simply to escape from home and her mother-in-law and she was extremely proud of these two modest rooms that she had furnished with cane mats and bamboo screens". The protagonist Tara, through her actions brings light in the dark life of Indian married women who dreams to lead their life according to their will.

Anita Desai's women characters Moyna and Tara have power to deal successfully with the frustration and disappointment given to them by our Indian society. Revealing the women's struggles and tussles for occupying personal space and individualism is the main strategy of Anita Desai in this story. She presented the problems both from single working woman and married women's point of view. Readers feel that Anita Desai shows her deeper understanding of women's psychology in her writings. The liberation from the venerable Indian customs and traditions is the basic goal of Anita Desai's women characters. They cannot see themselves as confined or imprisoned. They just want to live their life as free

as a bird. They considered their identity and self-respect as the primary goal of their life

Anita Desai is fully dedicated towards the women's personal dreams. She never condemns such women who desire to set positive examples of attaining personal identity in the male-dominated world. She also points out that male chauvinism always tries to destroy the personal identity of the Indian women, but their determination and strong-will power still saves them. Anita Desai acts as the mediator between the Indian women and their personal dreams. She helps and encourages Indian women to move forward in their life to secure their personal identity and space in the society. She is completely dedicated towards the issues which Indian society tries to ignore. Gopal N.R. writes about Anita Desai (2013:28) Anita Desai's psychological probings of the women is that she includes female of different age groups. It is not that she confines herself to the young or the middle-aged". Anita Desai is superb in bringing our attention towards women of all ages. She is capable of understanding their problems and also come up with solution in some cases. Her women character leaves marvelous effect on the mind of the readers. They discover their personal identity after struggling a lot in the traditional Indian society.

Anita Desai portrays another women character Polly who believes in self discovery in story "The Artist's Life". The protagonist is the young girl Polly who declares that she is interested in profession of an artist. She had great desire to succeed in her life.

After reading the minds of Anita Desai's women characters in the selected stories The Farewell Party, Scholar and Gypsy, The Rooftop Dwellers and The Artist's Life, we can sum up that needs of the Indian women changed a lot in the post-independence phase. Earlier they were contented in the role set by the patriarchal society. But with the changing time, they are inclined towards their individualism. They have courage to raise their voice against the patriarchal power which is considered as one of the major culprit in the way of their happiness. They don't ponder too much that what people think about them. When they rebel for their rights, they protest to add grace to their life. The present research paper mainly focuses on the emancipation of the Indian women. The assertion of their individualism seems to be one of the main objectives of the present paper. Anita Desai goes inside the psyche of Indian women and tries to explore her understanding about the needs of the modern Indian women to the world. The protagonists in her stories are strong women and desire to lead the purposeful life. They strongly condemn the traditional thinking in which women always expect to walk behind their husbands. For instance, the protagonist Pat and Tara in stories Scholar and Gypsy, The Rooftop Dwellers respectively who completely want salvation within the tradition. They are not interested to destroy their individualism for the sake of their relations.

Conclusion

To be sum up, Anita Desai presents an excellent mirror of urban culture through her stories.

She presents the distinct picture of women's quest for her individualism and privatization both from East and the West culture. She reveals the existence of women is the same everywhere in few aspects. And the only difference between them is their cultural disparity. The present study exposes the evils of patriarchy from Anita Desai's point of view. Many contemporary writers gave their viewpoints on women's need for personal space but Anita Desai's viewpoints are quite different from them. She is mainly interested in bringing women's issues in her stories. This research paper makes attempt to expose the rigid customs and traditions of the Indian society.

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