

The Psychological aspects in Women Characters in the Short stories of Anita Desai

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Abstract:

The short stories of post independent women writers show the stereotypical roles women have to play in the so-called educated and enlightened middle or upper-middle class of the society. The image of women has been going on different changes in fiction for the past four decades. The social structure is clearly reflected in the short stories of Desai. She has been gifted with such a feminine sensibility that her female characters have been clearly expressed. All the female characters come alive to their dynamic process, always growing and changing, viable and mutable.

Key words: *Independent, enlightened, fiction, feminine, sensibility, dynamic*

Introduction:

Anita Desai is interested in the portrayal of psychological reality. She prefers characters with some angularity and eccentricity in those who are normal and therefore, general. The interest in psychological study of characters which distinguishes Anita Desai's novels, also characterizes her short stories, though they do not offer scope for full length psychographs as the novels do.

Several of her stories explore tensions between family members and the alienation of middle-class women. Most of these women are economically independent and capable of taking care of themselves especially the two women characters presented in the short story *The Rooftop*

Dwellers. The two women. Tara and Moyna are presented as ambitious, hard-working, sincere and intellectual women who want do their utmost to succeed in the career market and carve out a niche for themselves. Desai is trying to explore what happens to the two women in the story who were seeking an identity of their own and self-actualization. Having made an attempt at independence, they retreat into the area of *'feminine mystique'* which reserves for them the traditional feminine roles. There are some circumstances that feel shame in Moyna's provisional life, but Desai gave her heroine comforts in rewarding her service. Moyna exudes confidence about meeting the world on her terms.

It could be a comment Desai is making on the optimism gap between generations. Marriage presented as inevitability in the life of a woman means her eventual return to the feminine roles reserved for the by patriarchy. The failure of the literary magazine actually becomes their failure. Moyna agrees to the marriage proposal as a way of escaping the problems arising out of confronting the world alone and Tara, already married, presumably returns to the family fold. The final destiny for women, the narrative unambiguous affirms, particularly in the Indian cultural context, is marriage and all the attendant feminine roles. *Srivatsava* says Desai, being a psychological novelist is concerned largely with the atmosphere of the mind of her character. (*Srivatsava, Ed., Perspectives on Anita Desai*, Ghaziabad: Viomal, 1984, P. XXII)

Female Psychology in various short stories:

Veena in *A Devoted Sun* behaves like a puppet and not like full-blown character. Her actions are predictable. She is an uneducated girl, but so old-fashioned, so placid and so complaisant that she slipped into the household and settled like a charm, seemingly too lazy and too good natured to even try and make Rakesh leave home and set up independently, as any other girl might have done. She was pretty "*In a plump, pudding way*" (P.No.72). Fatness is generally associated with insensitivity by Anita Desai. She is tactful, smirking and sliding merrily" (P.No. 76)

In the short story *Sale* the artist's wife sits, kneading dough in a brass bowl, with her head bowed so that her long hair broods down in her shoulders on either side her heavy, troubled face. The red border of her saree cuts a bright gash through the still tableau. The child sits on her mat beside her, silent, absorbed, in the mysteries of a long handled spoon which he turns over with soft, wavering fingers that are unaccustomed to the unsympathetic steel. His head, too, is bowed so that his father, behind him, "can see the small wisps of her

hair on the back of his neck. He looks at them holding his breath till it begins to hurt his chest
“ (P.No. 41)

In *Surface Textures*, the wife Sheila reveals a typical Indian wife’s characteristic traits. Her use of kumkum that daily ‘cuts’ a gash of red colour, is also something uniquely Indian (P.No.19). When her husband left his job, she felt miserable. The first few days Sheila stormed and screamed like some shrill, wet hurricane about the house.

“How am I to go to market and buy vegetable for dinner?

I don’t even have enough for that. What am I to feed the boys tonight” (P.No. 17)

After that she wept, she lay on her bed in a bath of tear and perspiration. She thought it was all her fault because she bought that water melon. It was only the kindness of their neighbours that saved them from starvation. They did not starve to death the very first week.

The short story *Royalty* explores female psychology in respect of sibling jealousy and male psychology of manipulating it to his benefit. When Sarala received the post card from Raja, her hands began to tremble; news from Raja. In a shaking voice she asked for her spectacles. Ravi passed them to her and she peered through them to convert the words as if they were a flight of migratory birds at a distance. Raja was in India, at his ashram in the South, Raja wrote in the letter to Sarala,

“You should be there, wouldn’t you? You won’t desert me”? (P.No. 2)

Sarala was all a flutter with excitement though it entailed the strenuous job of unpacking and setting the house to proper order. Sarala, a practical woman, comparatively fails to understand Raja’s poetic approach to life. *Rajeswar Mittapalli* feels. “It also indicates |Desai’s sober and balanced attitude to women and their aspirations. She knows that Indian women must have their proper place with opportunities for self-actualization.” (*Indian women Novelists and Psychoanalysis: A Study of the Neurotic Characters*. New Delhi; Atlantic publishers and Distributors, 2001, (P.No. 96). Developed with a sense of humour, the story presents a fine study in human psychology and love.

In short story *Winterscape*, the psychology of the two sisters Anu and Asha is movingly presented. The sympathetic and affectionate nature and concern Anu has for her widowed sister are beautifully pictured in the story. Knowing that the one thing that could comfort Asha was the present of the baby in her arms. Anu had planned to leave the boy with her widowed sister out of love, out of sympathy when her husband died. She is not jealous about sharing her role. Their lives continue to revolve around Rakesh whereas he has moved on to establish

his own family. Rakesh is caught between two cultures and has conflicting loyalties. He disappointed them. They try, but fail to re-create the warmth and homely feeling of the Indian farm in Canada.

The tensions between women and their families are portrayed well by Desai. Rakesh, now “*a husband*”, “*a Canadian*” and fairly alienated from his past, has trouble explaining to his wife, Beth, the love and sympathy with which his mother gave him to her childless sister. Just as it is a child that has kept the two sisters together, it is the both of Beth’s baby that gives these women a fleeting moment of bonding. Beth attempts to understand the bond between the two mothers of her Indian husband. Beth is unable to imagine delegating her baby to her own, incautious sister. That is the difference between an Indian woman and a foreign one. Desai shows that women required developing “*defensive strategies*” whether alone in a large city or still within the confines of their family homes.

Mr. Fernandez in *Pineapple Cake* is less educated but more worldly wise. She is used to the realities of life. At the time of wedding of Carmen Maria and De Millo, she eats a lot pine apple cake, though a gentleman has just died and the cake appears as if it were a skeleton to her son

Victor. But she satisfies her just for eating and does not philosophize like her son. She is, therefore, practical and has nothing to do with the contemplative side of life.

The sketches of wives are certainly Desai’s forte: for they are paragons of virtue. It is not because they have been made so intentionally but because their quest for higher values is extraordinarily convincing and of a universal appeal. Mr. Bose in *Private Tutions* by her ill manners as much as he is bored of his students. But her character seems to be humble and loving. She is totally dedicated to her kitchen and renders her services promptly.

Pat in *Scholar and Gypsy* is lady of very independent nature. Her husband is busy with his research work. She has to be alone most of the time in India. She does not like Bombay and Delhi. She goes to Murali, where she prefers the hippie cult to the accompaniment of her husband to America. She believes in the seamy side of life more than its realities. She gives up a life of material comforts, leaves her husband and decides to “*the simple life*” (P.No. 137). Pat came of pain, strong farmer stock; she ought to have some of that blood in her, strong, simple and capable. Even Pat realizes that her marriage with David has been mismatch and thus liable to alienation:

“ I’m not sophisticated enough for you. ‘It was the first

time she mentioned the disparity in their background – it had never seemed to matter before “ (P.No. 113)

Unlike Pat, Bina in *The Farewell Party* is a lady of good taste and good manners and she has talent as a hostess. She was thirty five. For fifteen years she had been bringing up their children and nursing the eldest who was severely spastic. This had involved her workings of the local hospital and with its doctors. She had a certain presence, a certain dignity, and people, having heard of the spastic child, liked and admired her but she had not thought she had friends.

Mrs. Fernandez and Pat have not convincingly been drawn, for they certainly lack an organic quality that might have enabled them to grow in accordance with the development in the story. But Otima Bose in *Pigeons at Daybreak* is a very devoted woman. Otima who loved to talk and hum Hindi songs had to be miserable as “*all throughout the night her husband moaned and gasped for life*” (P.No. 101). It depicts the devotion of a true Indian wife to her valetudinarian husband. Many times Mr. Bose ridicules his wife because of his losing battle against illness. Yet, Otima nurses him and humours him because she was loved him for so long. Thus, the characters are also shown struggling with their fate. They are caught in difficult situations and the conflict is not only with their circumstances but also with their own selves. As always, Desai explores her subject with sensitivity while maintaining the perfect authorial distance, achieving a compassion and subtle irony.

Conclusion:

What mattered for Anita Desai are only the characters, their motivation of their tensions. Her purpose is to make the interiors of a character transparent to the reader. That is why Desai has no messages to convey and no lessons to teach through her fictional works. The stories of Anita Desai stir up the feelings of the reader through the psychological depth and perceptive tone. Hence, her female characters have their own specific identity in her short stories as they fully exhibit their female sensibilities.

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