

Woman's Search for Identity, in selected novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are prose rhapsodists of feelings, sentiments and emotions passing through the human consciousness, like Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen. Their attention is focused also on feminine suffering in the complex cultural stresses and strains of Indian society. A new generation of women emerged, embracing the changed values in which women have a voice of their own, a voice that had been suppressed for centuries. An attempt has been made in the present study to identify the concept of domestic relationships with reference to three novels of Anita Desai namely Cry, The Peacock (1963), Voices In The City (1965) and Where Shall We Go This summer? (1975) and three novels of Shashi Deshpande namely The Dark Holds No terrors (1980), That Long Silence (1988) and The Binding Vine (1992).

Keywords: sentiments and emotions, emerged, domestic relationships.

INTRODUCTION

The present study is an effort to assign women their due place in society, which till now has been as second class citizens. This study presents a picture of the impact of education on women, her new status in the society and her assertion of individuality. Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, in their novels, mainly explore the emotional world of women, revealing a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology. Their writings raise a voice against mute miseries and helplessness of millions of married women tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments.

Anita Desai intends to expose the inner psyche of the characters in her novels. The modern life especially that of the middle class women, is burdened with mental stress, unfulfilled aspirations and unsatisfied desires. The domestic and social situations cause and even aggravate a kind of neurosis. The diagnosis and analysis of this mental ailment is invariably manifested through her female characters created in her novels. Anita Desai portrays the inner conflicts of their characters and also underlines their individuality and quest for freedom. Man and patriarchal power is responsible for all violent and disturbing things. Anita Desai's women know how they have been trapped and how they can begin to live afresh but, the obstacle is Man, entering in her world as a disturbing factor.

Anita Desai's characters can be classified in two distinctive groups – those who fail to adjust to the harsh realities of life and those who compromise. In a novel, as in life, there are those who always remain “outsiders” because they cannot accommodate themselves to the world of realities. Maya in Cry, The Peacock and Monisha in Voices In The City fail to adjust to the harsh realities of life and reach an unhappy end. But Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? compromises on these realities. But at the end of the novel we cannot tell whether she manages to lead a healthy life after her return to Bombay, or she simply strides back into her former neurotic rages and fears. In the novels of Anita Desai, almost all the protagonists wrestle with the forces working against their individual identity in society. All the protagonists show their willingness to wage a war against those social forces that block their smooth existence. Her Cry, the Peacock is an externalization of the interior of Maya's cocoon. Where Shall We Go This Summer? is a

lyrical outburst of women seeking peace and quiet in life. Voices in the City is the reflection of the rattling reverberations of her sensitive characters under the tyrannizing force of the city of Calcutta. Thus the novelist solves an intrigue of human relationship and the problem of woman's search for identity.

Though Shashi Deshpande, in her novels, raises a voice against the social and cultural oppression of women, she does not carry the revolt against tradition and patriarchal values to finality. In fact, her main concern in her novels is to explore the inner world of her women protagonist and to reveal how through introspection they achieve integration of their fragmented selves. Deshpande's women protagonists emerge from a male – dominated middle class conservative society which is conservative in its outlook of life.

Women characters, especially the protagonists, in Shashi Deshpande's novels find themselves in conflict with their domestic and social environment. As they struggle against the changed realities of their lives, they experience conflicts psychic of personal origin their milieu acts both as a physical reality outside and as a psychic agent within. At a particular point of time in their life, the stress of their mental conflicts becomes so great that they find it difficult to keep their feelings in control. The situation leads to the fragmentation of their self and they suffer from temporary phases of neurosis. However, their neurotic ailment produces a sobering effect on them as they make important discoveries about themselves in the course of their neurotic sufferings. Reevaluation of life and of their own relationship with others gives them insight into the significance of life and leads to the integration of their fragmented self. Through the sensitive portrayal of the psychic conflicts of her fictional characters, Shashi Deshpande lays bare the oppressive and anti-human values system of society. She seems to suggest the need of subverting the anti-human socio-cultural values and replacing them by such values as may be conducive to human happiness and well-being. Her novels are remarkable portrayals of the conflicts of human motives and of the psychological fragmentation that such a conflict causes. However, her novels end on a positive note, for all the leading characters in her novels grow aware of their negative attitudes and gain fresh insight into the significance of life by reaching out to the other human beings. Shashi Deshpande's real contribution lies in the portrayal of plights and problems, trials and tribulation of the middle class Indian woman specially those who are educated and have chosen a career for themselves. Shashi Deshpande knows this segment of the Indian society.

Shashi Deshpande deals with one of the important aspects of life, in her novels, and that is marriage. Contrary to the traditional view which holds marriage as the sum mum bonum of a women's life, she presents marriage as a weapon in the hands of patriarchal society to coerce and subjugate women. In The Binding Vine, Urmila compares the bent neck of a bride on the wedding night to a lamb's neck awaiting the butcher's knife to fall upon it. In The Dark Holds No Terrors, Saru views herself as a desperate animal caught in the trap of marriage.

In That Long Silence, Jaya sees herself and her husband as a pair of bullocks joined together who cannot move in opposite directions for fear of pain. The plight of Jaya's mother-in-law is even worse. She silently endures the sexual onslaughts of her husband and dies in a pathetic condition when she tries to rid herself of the birth of an unwanted baby. The novelist realistically presents the hypocrisy of married life which is widespread in society. In spite of her economic independence, the woman is considered inferior to man and is coerced to suppress her longings and her individuality. Although Shashi Deshpande's novels reflect the harsh realities of woman's life, the final impression of her works is not gloomy. Her protagonists discover a meaning in life and achieve a sense of balance. They realize the significance of human relationship which helps them synthesize their different roles into a unity. Women characters, especially the protagonists, in Shashi Deshpande's novels find themselves in conflict with their domestic and social environment.

CONCLUSION

The relationships described by Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are not happy and healthy relationships. What are the reasons behind these unhappy relationships? Why the characters of their novels could not get healthy development of their personalities. Most of the major characters have a near neurotic quality. They are constantly disturbed by familial ties that they find uncomfortable and with these familial ties they cannot reconcile their individual values. Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai's insight into the complex texture of

Indian (Hindu) society is clear from their novels. They note the existence of two simultaneous trends that was prevalent in the Indian society since the days of the Puranas. There is a long tradition of worshipping goddesses, and also the tradition of denying human status to women. Again, women are not treated equally under the same roof. In a family, the mother figure may be all – powerful while her daughter – in – law is tortured and humiliated. Such keen observation of reality enabled Deshpande to develop an unbiased view of the situation. The novel exposes her belief that the women themselves are not less responsible than men for the sufferings of women. Both men and women in India have to broaden their consciousness first, and to criticize their own feelings and attitude in order to give equal status to women. Thus, we can say that a conducive, free and understanding husband-wife relationship is the fulcrum on which social equilibrium depends.

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