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Themes Of Alienation And Reconciliation In Select Novels Of Anita Desai And Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract

Indian English women fiction writers portray the status of women through their writings in the Indian context. No matter whether women have problems with their male partners, mothers-in-law, and the elders of the family, they are anticipated to accept whatever comes to them. Though the suppression of women is an age-old concept, it is everywhere in society. Women have many ways to free themselves from psychological issues and physical assaults. But something inside them is not allowed to come out from them. Familial ties, affection, responsibility, etc. tie women into a family as well as disharmonies, hatred, struggles, physical assaults, communication gaps, incompatibilities, and negligence make women feel alienated. Though women hold many degrees and excellent positions, they are not allowed to rationalize things inside their own house. Some women fiction writers depict their women characters as achievers after all the obstacles.

Keywords: disharmonies, hatred, marriage, suppression, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is one of the prominent writers in Indian Writing in English. In the Indian Literary arena, Anita Desai is celebrated as a psychoanalyst novelist. Anita Desai discusses the predicaments of women in an affectionless life. Of course, Anita Desai has not portrayed the men as merciless and heartless human beings but their silence and inattentive nature force the women to get confused. The author says that her feminism cannot be measured against men.

The feminist movement in India tends to be rather impatient with my books and to think of them as books about completely helpless women, hopeless women, they find it somewhat that the women do not fight back, but they do not seem to realize how very new this movement is. (Indian Women Novelists, 45)

The rude and practical mentality makes the women highly wounded. Amar Nath Dwivedi writes in his book entitled *Contemporary Indian Fiction in English*: "Anita Desai is the first among Indian English novelists to have forcefully expressed the existential problems of womankind; she is the first to have laid bare the inner recesses of the human psyche; she is the first to introduce the deep psychological probing of her characters." (10)

Bharati Mukherjee is a well-known fiction writer of the 1990s. She is one of the best writers of the Indian Diaspora who lived in the US. She delineates the life of traditional Indian women and their struggles in an alien land. Her novel *Wife* delineates the life of a young married woman who struggles to win the heart of her husband as well as a struggle to lead a life in an alien land. Mukherjee's eponymous character Jasmine is a strong woman who finds ways to establish herself in an alien land US. Each step of her life from India to the US teaches a lot. After all the hindrances, Jasmine establishes herself successfully.

Anita Desai's two novels *Cry, the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* depict its women characters as representatives of female predicaments. The two female characters Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* are portrayed as continuous sufferers of a tasteless life. The protagonist's prime motto is to be attached to their male partners. The emotional detachment highly disturbs them. This shows their dependent mind. In the novel *Cry, the Peacock* Maya's previous life with her father was a successful one. She had a happy life in her father's house. She often compares her past life with her present life. Life with her advocate husband Gautama is weird. In the next novel *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* Sita is portrayed as a hypersensitive woman. Sita repeatedly thinks of her past life. (life in Manori Island). Maya is also a hypersensitive woman. But she never reacts toward anything whereas Sita often reacts and leaves the house. Due to the over-sensitive nature, Sita starts smoking cigarettes. R. K. Gupta in his book *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Feminism Perspective* comments: "Desai's female characters are generally neurotic, highly sensitive but alienated in a world of dreams and fantasy. They are separated from their surroundings as an outcome of their failure or unwillingness to adjust to reality (10)."

Maya wants to be nurtured. Her need for sexual attachment highly upsets her. As the novelist writes "She sat there and waited for her husband to come home. Now and then she went out into the verandah and looked to see if he were coming up the drive which lay shrivelling, melting and then shrivelling again, like molten lead in a groove cut into the earth". (CP 11) Shanta Krishnaswami says about the relationship between Maya and Gautama in her book *Anita Desai: The Sexist Nature of Sanity. The Woman in Indian Fiction in English*: "Her needs for nurturance and for being nurtured are left unfulfilled by a husband who is incapable of husbanding her in the traditional masculine role". (250) Maya is frequently frightened by the prophecy made by the Albino Astrologer. The Astrologer utters: "My child, I would not speak of it if I saw it on your face alone. But look, at the horoscope. Stars do not lie. And it is best to warn you, prepare you, prepare you death to one of you. When you are married-and you shall be married young..... Death- an early one--by unnatural causes." (CP 13)

The excessive affection from her father and alienation from her husband makes her neurotic. S. Gunasekaran observes in his article entitled *Alienation of Women Character in the select works of Anita Desai*: "When a woman is caught in the trap of marriage, she has the only way left is to languish in misery. Somehow, she reveals an evident lack of trust in marriage and marital relationships. Every attempt a

woman makes to redefine herself inevitably ends up in a lack of communication. This leads them to alienation". (285)

Anita Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* is a story of a suppressed woman Sita. The novel discloses the disharmonies of the husband and wife. Sita is suffered from loneliness. Though she has four children, she feels isolated. Sita's conflicts represent the women in Indian society. Sita is also like Maya. She is trapped in an affectionless marriage. The two names Raman and Sita have a great history in the epic Ramayana. Raman is an embodiment of Lord Vishnu while Sita is an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi. They led a happy life before Raman's banishment. Sita's life in the novel *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* is completely a different story. Raman's behavior irritates Sita. Like Gautama in the novel *Cry, the Peacock*, Raman is a casual man. Misunderstandings and communication gaps bring many issues between Raman and Sita. She often gets irritated for tiny matters. Moreover, the fifth pregnancy drags Sita into sane. Fear about life pushes her into neurotic. Sita feels confined inside her own house. The novel *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* is divided into three parts: Monsoon'67, Winter' 47, and again Monsoon' 67. The first part discusses the combination of her present and past situations of Sita, the second part discloses her poor childhood experiences and the last part delineates the struggles of Sita at Manori Island.

Bharati Mukherjee discusses the problems of women throughout her works. She highly focuses on women's marriage in a male dominating society, contradictions between the tradition and foreign cultures, and cultural shock in an alien land. In an interview with Runar Vignission, Bharati Mukherjee says that: "There were many aspects of India that I disliked by then. So a lot of my stories since are really about transformation – psychological transformation – especially among women" (4). The author's own experiences in an alien land help her to understand the conflicts of South Asian women.

The famous novel *Wife* is a story of a twenty-year-old girl Dimple Dasgupta. Dimple hails from a middle-class Hindu Brahmin family. She is a girl with high dreams about her marriage. She is advised to obey the conservative codes of her society. She is depicted as an imbalanced woman who has different views of life. She lives in an imaginary world and often reads a magazine. Her habit of reading magazines does not allow her to think about the harsh realities of the world.

Dimple believes that marriage would bring her freedom. She hopes for a better future. "It would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love" (W 3)" Dimple expects to be a wife of a neurosurgeon or an architect. She wants to live in a luxurious family. Dimple is getting married to an ordinary middle-class man Amit Basu. On her wedding day, ten kilos of rotten fish are thrown away into a dustbin. "From the window of the bathroom on the wedding morning, Dimple saw crows and pariah dogs work through the rotten fish that had been thrown in an open dump in the alley behind the house" (W 16). Dimple compares her life with the rotten fish. As a newly married woman Dimple has fear about her immigration: "The thought of living in Africa and North America terrified her. She wanted to know how long they would stay, but she didn't know quite how to ask it without revealing her fears" (W 51)"

Dimple does not like anything in her mother-in-law's house. She hates her new name Nandhini. She feels dejected and alienated. Dimple tries to get attracted to Amit. He says: "I always thought I would marry tall girl. You know the kind I mean, one meter sixty-one or sixty-two centimeters, tall and slim. Also, convent educated fluent in English" (W 60). Amit expects Dimple to be like Sita in Ramayana: "to

jump into fire if necessary" (W 59). Amit has a peculiar habit of killing innocent birds. His behavior threatens Dimple. While moving to US Dimple becomes pregnant. Dimple does not want to fly with a burden. She considers the unborn child a burden. She even dislikes the pregnant mouse in her house. Dimple slays it cruelly. Bharati Mukherjee describes Dimple's actions as:

She stood up nervously and grabbed a broom as a weapon. She chased it behind the door.....brought her broom down again and again on the cement floor..... she chased it to the bathroom.... I will get you, there is no way out of this, my friend and in an outburst of hatred, her body shuddering, her wrist that fury, she smashed the top of a small grey head. It had a strangely swollen body. A very small creature with a fat belly. To Dimple the dead mouse looked pregnant. (W63)

Though Dimple is brought up as a traditional girl, hates the thought of motherhood. In a book entitled *The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant*. Bharati Mukherjee: *Critical Perspectives* Maya Manju Sharma writes: "a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood" (15). In the US Dimple is offered a job as a sales girl by someone at the party. Amit denies it and his immediate response is: "One bread winner in the family is quiet enough.....besides Dimple can't add two and two. She would ruin your business in a fortnight" (W 61).

Bharathi Mukherjee's next novel *Jasmine* deals with a story of a young woman Jasmine who emancipates herself from the conservative thoughts of her society and establishes herself in an alien land. The author says in an interview with Rumara regarding an immigrant's life is a series of incarnations: "I have been murdered and reborn at least three times, the very correct young woman I was trained to be, and was very happy being, is very different from the politicized, shrill, civil rights activist I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States." (17)

She expects a 'special' survival even from her childhood. She hates all the traditional rules. She is a widow and often changes her name. She is like a reptile chameleon who transforms herself from place to place. She is a constant fighter. Prakash is a man of good thoughts. He accepts Jyoti as his wife. He expects Jyoti to be a modern woman. He dislikes his wife's name. So, he calls Jyoti as "Jasmine." (J 69) Prakash is killed in a bomb blast by Khalsa Lions before leaving India. Jasmine plans to accomplish the dream of her husband. After reaching the Florida coast Jasmine is introduced to the captain Half-Face. He exploits her. She transforms herself as Goddess 'Kali' and murmurs: "No one to call, no one to disturb us. Just me and the man who raped me, the man I had murdered. The room looked like a slaughterhouse. Blood hold congealed on by hands, my chin, my breasts.....I was in a room with a slain man, my blood blooded. I was walking death, Death incarnate". (J 119)

Jasmine then meets a kind lady Lillian Gordon, A Quaker lady. She offers Jasmine food and shelter. The old lady does not enquire about Jasmine's past life. She says: "She has a low tolerance for reminiscence, bitterness or nostalgia. Let the past make you wary by all means" (J 131). Lillian Gordon calls Jasmine 'Jazzy'. Lillian Gordon teaches Jazzy the American lifestyle. Jazzy assimilates the new style and walks out of Gordon's house. Jazzy encounters Taylor and Wylie Hayeses. She works as a caretaker for Taylor and Wylie Hayeses' adopted daughter Duff. In Taylor's house, Jasmine is called 'Jase'. (J 173) The change of name shows her development as an American and accepts the changes. Jase utters: "I wanted to become the person they thought, they saw: humorous, refined, and affectionate." (J 174) She

becomes an American and gains more confidence than before. She speaks perfect English now. She transforms herself a complete American and it gives her confidence. She courageously acknowledges her new identity: "On Calremont Avenue, in the Hayeses big, clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a different alien with good forged documents into adventurous Jase" (J 186)

In Iowa Jasmine comes across mother Ripplemeyer. Ripplemeyer introduces her son Bud to Jasmine. Bud is an employee in a bank and gets a job for Jasmine. He likes to call her 'Jane'. "Bud calls me Jane, me Bud, you Jane.....Jane as in Jane Russell, not Jane as in Plain Jane. But Plain Jane is all I want to be. Plain Jane is a role, like any other" (J 176). This is again a renewal from Jase to Jane. Bud adopts a refugee Du. Jasmine once more takes a caretaker job during the daytime. She often acts as a wife to Bud at night. Jasmine comes across many men throughout her life. She murmurs: "I have had a husband for each of the woman I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Half-Face for Kali, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane" (J 197). Du often remembers Prakash to Jasmine. Du is Jasmine's soul companion. She cannot imagine a life without Du. Du is asked to live with her sister in Los Angeles.

Jasmine thinks: "Blood is thick. Du, my adopted son is a mystery, but the perfect of longing for him is like a miscarriage. I had relied on him, my silent ally against the bright lights, the rounded, genial landscape of Iowa" (J 221). The departure of Du drags her again into a lonely life. She screams for Du. Jasmine thinks that it is like someone takes Prakash from her life again. Bharati Mukherjee describes her emotions: "How dare he leave me alone out here? How dare he retreat with my admiration, my pride, my total involvement in everything he did? His education was my education. His wiring circuits were as close to Vijn & Vijn as I would ever get. Perhaps those two drops of soldering were my assignment in this lifetime. Now I could end it." (J 223) Thoughts like an American and American lifestyle completely transform Jasmine's life. She is no more an Indian. She does not think about others. She successfully establishes herself according to her plans. Her transformation shows her boldness and rationalized thinking capability.

Anita Desai's projection of women is different. In *Cry, the Peacock* the author shows how Maya is getting suffered in her marital life. This depicts the immature mind of the Maya. Though Maya is highly educated, never tries to understand the realities of life. The unfortunate death of Gautama is disturbed Maya's psyche. Gautama's death is caused naturally. She links the astrologer's words with the demise of Gautama. She is in the position that unable to live without Gautama. In *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* Anita Desai discloses a different story. Sita is projected as a hypersensitive woman who holds many complaints. She believes that her escape to Manori Island gives her pure and peaceful life. But on Manori Island, Sita feels alienated. Though she is a hypersensitive woman, understands the realities of life. Alienation takes her hopes away. When Raman comes to Manori Island, Sita is ready to go with him. The casual minds of the men Gautama and Raman are disturbed the women. Their silence and hypersensitive nature drag them into neurotic. The two protagonists never agree on life as it comes. Though Maya and Sita have their own identities, they need to be recognized and fight for their life. The need for physical as well as emotional attachment is denied to them. This is the root cause of their problems.

Bharati Mukherjee's protagonists are caught between two cultures. Both the protagonists' Dimple and Jasmine enter an alien land differently. Dimple Dasgupta enters along with her husband while Jasmine enters alone. Dimple enters with the hope of a bright future and Jasmine gets into it to fulfill her

husband's dream. While Maya and Sita search for their identity inside their house, Dimple and Jasmine search for it in an alien land. All four women suffer from an alienated life. Maya, Sita, and Dimple search for love in routine life. Though Prakash loves Jasmine, he cannot travel with his wife for a long time. Jasmine's meeting with different men teaches her a lot. Maya, Sita, and Dimple do not meet many men like Jasmine.

The two novels *Cry, the Peacock* and *Wife* have many similarities. The two women Maya and Dimple are portrayed as weak women who fail to rationalize things around them. They always expect something from their loved ones that they really cannot get in their life. They fight for their needs. Gautama and Amit Basu are casual men who never understand the desires of their wives. Amit's rude nature and calmness push Dimple into neurotic. Gautama often utters Maya: "spoilt child" (CP 19).

Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* and Jyoti in *Jasmine* are portrayed as bold women. Though in the beginning, Sita is depicted as a hypersensitive woman who understands the truth of life. She returns with her husband to Mumbai. In the book *The Novels of Mrs. Anita Desai: A Study* Ramachandra Rao writes: "Sita and Raman represent the eternal opposition between the prose and passion in lives. Raman says the 'great yes' and achieves honor and success in life. Sita in her obdurate pride, says 'No', but is ultimately compelled to arrive at some kind of compromise with life." (43) Jasmine is depicted as a brave woman who establishes herself in an unfamiliar land. Jasmine's source of inspiration is Prakash: "Think Viji & Wife! Prakash exhorted me from every corner of our grief darkened room. There is no dying; there is only an ascending or adescending, moving on to other planes. Don't crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism. That Jyoti is dead." (J 96) So, she moves to the US.

Though we are living in a post-modern era women like Maya and Dimple are lead life in society. They are the complete pictures of the predicaments of women. They cannot come out from their traditional roles. Their need for attachment is the root cause of their downfall. They lost life at a young age. Maya's instability often pushes her to think of her past life. Dimple's mental instability pushes her to behave cruelly. Sita and Jasmine acted smartly to tackle difficult situations. Sita's bold decision and Jasmine's transformation show their inner courage. Though Maya and Dimple are depicted as weak and dependent, they fight continuously for their rights. The two fiction writers Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee emphasize the plights of women in various ways. In the same way, the writers provide positive ways through their protagonists. Of course, death is not a remedy for problems. Though Maya and Dimple are buried, their continuous efforts could stay in the hearts of the readers. The two novels *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Jasmine* offer a positive solution to the present-day dilemmas of women.

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