
Gender-discrimination and Feminine Sensibility in Anita Desai's Fiction

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Abstract:

This research paper titled Gender-discrimination and Feminine Sensibility in Anita Desai Fiction dwells upon the exploration of the hidden issues related to gender-discrimination and feminine sensibility deeply granted up in the fiction of Anita Desai, one of leading female-novelists of the image contemporary Indian English literature. Gender-discrimination occurs as a great social disease Indian particularly in the patriarchal conservative society where a woman is ill-treated, misbehaved and disrespected because of being a women, a feminine gender. She is born and brought up in the Indian phallocentric society only to cook the food in the kitchen, to bear children and confined only to her domestic responsibilities. She lacks her own identity, freedom her self-esteem. She is deprived of her social engagement. She is treated only as a puppet having no freedom at all to live independently. Anita Desai has highlighted all these issues very boldly in her fictitious. Being a woman, she could much better understand the problems of a woman.

In the Indian system traditionally, a woman is supposed to be the property of another man, born and brought up as a woman only to cope with the domestic requirements. Her task is confined only to domestic purposes. Her fiction focuses upon the various complex issues related to the gender-discrimination and the problems of the females in the patriarchal society. Apart from it, her fictional works also concentrate our attention upon the inner lives and emotions of the women in terms of their struggles, desires and aspirations. She happens to be a great feminist thinker. She is much better known for her exposure of the inner-lives of the women, their emotional conflicts and their psychological status in the conservative and brutal patriarchal Indian society. She is very much compared to Virginia Woolf because of her innovation of this style. She not only pays her attention only on the external social exposure and engagement of the females in her novels, but rather she rather she happens to delve very deeply into their minds, by the representation of their female protagonists and characters, highlighting their various issues emerging out of isolation, alienation, matrimonial

frustration, and exploration of their own identity and self-esteem. Most of her fictional-works tend to expose the predicament of such females who are culturally and emotionally leading a dependent life, depending on males, frequently are getting mentally harassed and discriminated against in the family and the patriarchal societal order. Characters like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Manisha in *Voices in the city* happen to reflect the painful and troublesome suffering of the females in the male-dominated patriarchal Indian society where a woman is ill-treated, misbehaved, exploited, discriminated, mentally tortured, financially frustrated and socially discriminated because of being born and brought up as a woman. In her novel *Fire on the Mountain*, she introduces her female protagonist Nanda Kand, withdrawn into isolation, exploring her self-dependance and self-identity after a lifetime of her domestic duties and responsibilities. She also deals with the sad plight of Uma in her novel *Fasting Feasting*. Thus she happens to introduce a different faces of the female characters as Maya in *cry, the Peacock*(1963), Nanda Kand in *Fire on the Mountain*(1977), Bim and Tara the two sisters in *Clear Light of the Day*(1980) and *Fasting Feasting*(1999). These female characters have to come across their silent struggles, frustrations and quest for their identity in the patriarchal social order quite differently.

Key-words: Gender-discrimination Feminine Sensibility misbehaved, disrespect, responsibilities, social engagement, deprived of sex-slave, patriarchal, predicament, aspirations etc.

This research-paper titled *Gender-discrimination and feminine sensibility in Anita Desai's Fiction* tends to bring about the exploration of the various shades of issues concerned with the lives of the females based on gender-discrimination in the conservative patriarchal Indian society and also the different colours of the feminine sensibility. Before we proceed, it is very much significant for us to point out the relevant interpretation of these two terms having distant relationship with each other. While talking of the gender-discrimination, this one is the commonest characteristic of the thirist area of mostly all the female-writers figuring out in the contemporary Indian English literature such as Kamla Das, Nayantara Sehgal, Mamta Kalia, Shashi Deshpande, Kamla Markandeya, Sarojini Naidu, Arundhati Roy, Taslima Nasrin, Atia Hussain etc. Gender-discrimination stands as such an evil practice of the patriarchal Indian Society where a woman is physically exploited, mentally harassed, financially frustrated, sexually molested and raped because of being a feminine

gender. She is ill-treated, misbehaved in this patriarchal social system because of her feminine gender and has to suffer discrimination everywhere not only in the family but also in the outside framework of the society. She has to come cross unequal job-opportunities, different standards or expectations based on gender. In India, she is bound to suffer in the patriarchal social order favouring male-domination and restricting her autonomy.

Let us define feminine sensibility as the fragrance of an artist's personality. Just as a flower is identified by its colour and fragrance, a bird by its song, an artist is identified by his/her sensibility.

It is like an echo of an artist's personality and identification. There are two types of sensibility – masculine and feminine. Just as we can't draw a dividing line between when the winter ends and when the spring begins, but we definitely feel the change of the season when it fully blossoms and comes into the full swing. So is the case between the masculine and the feminine sensibility. On the ground of the latest researches based upon the theories of the psychologists- Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Kate Millet, Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showlwater etc. Comparatively a woman is supposed to be more possessive, nurturant, submissive, loving, kind and merciful, while males are much more aggressive, retaliative and callous by temperament.

As the harbinger of the 20thC. Indian English Literature, Anita Desai happens to be a very dominant and prominent fictional-writer in the realm of Indian English literature. She has very beautifully dealt with these two terms – gender-discrimination and the feminine sensibility in mostly all her novels. Being a woman, she could much better perceive and feel the problems and issues of a female. The whole experience of the social world from the viewpoint of a woman is called the feminine sensibility. There are the different colours and shades of the feminine sensibility such as the problems related to the love and marriage, man-woman relationships, rape-violence, sexual -exploitation, molestation, female-child marriage, gender-discrimination caused to the females inside and outside the family in the patriarchal social order, mental-harassment of the females, dowry and domestic violence, matrimonial disgust, mismatched marriages etc. All these issues have been very seriously dealt with a great courage and confidence by her in most of her novels. Particularly being a great feminist thinker, she has raised her voices very boldly by virtue of her novels, against the female exploitation, gender- discrimination being rudely caused to the females. Her famous novels are - Cry, The Peacock, Voices in the city, Where Shall We Go This Summer, Fire on the Mountain, Clear Light of Day, Bye Bye Blackbird etc. Apart from all these literary creations, she has also written many other novels. Her

novel-Fasting Feasting is a very impressive and powerful reflection of the phallogocentric Indian society governed by its gender-discriminatory dual value system. Her debut novel- Cry the Peacock is a fine exposure of the psychic realities of characters. Maya, the female-protagonist, a hypersensitive woman gets physically and mentally divorced from the middle-aged, pragmatic and rational husband Gautama. Her second novel-Voices in the City is a very beautiful representation of the strugglesome life of the men and women residing in Kolkata aspiring and striving for a higher and luxurious life of conscience and values. One of the female characters in the novel- Manisha happens to remain as a victim of a suffocational and isolated conjugal life with Jiban, an insensitive- being. Her novel Bye-Bye Blackbird also highlights the troublesome and painful matrimonial life of Adit and Sarah, getting confronted with the problems of mutual adjustment and understanding with each other's cultures. Her another novel-Where Shall We Go This Summer deals with the marital incompatibility between Raman and Sita. They happen to stand as a contrast to the conjugal life of Ram and Sita who still remain as a symbol of perfection and sacrifice. Her next novel- Fire on the Mountain, which brought her Sahitya Akademi Award of 1978, exposes the forced isolation of Nanda Kaul and the secluded life of Raka, her great grand daughter.

Thus, Desai has basically dealt with fundamental themes of the cultural conflict, isolation, seclusion, identity-crisis, gender-discrimination, the female-exploitation, social injustice done to the females in the patriarchal social order. Thus there are various colours, shades and a vast range of her themes as the reflection of the beauty of her feminine sensibility. Let us find out all these various themes in her novels.

Her famous novel-Fasting Feasting deals with the odour of her feminine sensibility in her exploration of mismatched cultures in the conjugal life, caused by the different cultures of America and India. Uma, an Indian wife and Arun, an American husband happen to get entrapped in the matrimonial bond, being unconscious of their respective cultures. She exposes the real face of the conservative patriarchal Indian Society where the issue of gender-discrimination has crept away. The characters here expose the dark picture of the patriarchal brutal Indian society where the issue of gender-discrimination has crept away. The characters here expose the dark picture of the patriarchal brutal Indian society where daughters are kept under restrictions lacking their autonomy and freedom. Basically it reflects the issue of sexual discrimination meted out to a girl child.

She very smoothly exposes the realistic fabric of the phallogocentric conservative society and brings light to the readers with disgusting and shameful treatment done to the females.

It is the most unfortunate picture of the society where the gender-discrimination is very deeply grounded up even today traditionally in the patriarchal conservative society. Here the birth of a son is more enthusiastically celebrated with pride, joy and felicity and considered a great blessing, while daughters are treated as life-long burden. Through this novel, she scatters the fragrance of her feminine sensibility to portray the picture of gender-discrimination showing a great concern for the cause of females. Thus she happens to concentrate our attention very boldly towards the drawbacks and loopholes in their faulty and unjust conservative system. This novel is a sad story of a divorced girl Uma who gets victimized by the brutal patriarchal society. Richardson's comments are here very much justified and pertinent about the conservative and rude nature of her parents- "In Papa and Mama, the Indian parents, she (Anita Desai) creates almost two monsters of almost Gothic proportions, locked into inseparable marital disharmony, determined to inflict on their two daughters and only son every ounce of the prejudice and disappointments of their own lives, as a respectable barrister and his wife in an undistinguished town."¹ Uma, the protagonist happens to be an aged woman when her mother finds herself pregnant and wishes to get it terminated because of her sickness. But Uma's father always wished to preferably to have a son in the family, the late pregnancy of his wife tempts him to take a chance of fathering a son. Though there had been two aged daughters in the family, yet Papa's earnest desire to have a son was almost irresistible. Anita Desai, here the Indian loose mentality of the patriarchal society to give undue over importance to sons and discriminate daughters.

"Would anyman give up the chance of a son?. The overimportance bestowed upon a son results in negligence and humiliation towards a girl-child. Strong disliking towards Uma is a depiction of this social reality."²

Her parents underestimate her education. When she started completing her homework and assignments of her college, her mother would thrust all the domestic responsibilities upon her, neglecting never thought seriously about her college-assignments. She can still be excused for ignoring her daughter's education and study, the father did nothing for his daughters education.

¹ Andrew Robinson, Families that Don't Function, The Spectator, 5th June, 1999, P.39

² Anita Desai, Fasting, Feasting (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999) P. 16

It is possible that she could have successfully passed her exam because of her keen interest in education, had she been provided tuition facilities.

Jasbir Jain very rightly comments here- "The joint control exercised by Mama Papa is equally destructive and life-denying. Rituals begin to seem meaningless after sometime, fears become obsessive and channels of communication are disrupted."³

Besides being a great feminist and a social realist, she has beautifully projected her feminine sensibility in the exploration of her spiritual consciousness in her novel-Journey to Ithaca. There is a very suitable comment of Suman Jana about the originality of her genius and a great talent- "Anita Desai, who occupies a distinct and distinctive place in the realm of contemporary Indian English fiction"⁴ is undoubtedly one of the most powerful Indian novelists in English."⁵ "This novel deals with her spiritual enlightenment and consciousness. R.S. Pathak comments about her another colours of the feminine sensibility"-This novel is Anita Desai assertive statement that the truth, the enlightenment and the totality of an all-encompassing spirituality is in heart of India.⁶ This novel is a Saga of multiple journeys undertaken by the three different characters at different planes of existence. There is an interconnection between each of these journeys and it never ends. Desai very aptly quotes in the epigraphy to Journey to Ithaca-

"Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind to arrive there is our ultimate goal, But don't hurry the voyage at all It is better to let it last for long years."⁷

Matteo,s Journey to Ithaca lays the foundation of the first part of the novel. Born and brought up with a silver spoon in a prosperous Italian family, Matteo makes his journey in the exploration of the brightness in the heart of his Ithaca- the mysterious place that is in India. It is India, a holy land of the saints, sages and self-enlightened

³ Jasbir Jain, *Stairs of the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai* (Jaipur Printwell,1999) P.191

⁴ Suman Jana "Journey to Ithaca ", *A Quest Novel*, "Critical Responses to Anita Desai, ed. Subha Tiwari (New Delhi:Atlantic,2004)Vol.2.P.353 "

⁵ A.K. Bachchan, *Anita Desai Journey to Ithaca. A Novel of Spiritual Quest*,*The Indian Journal of English Studies*, Vol.XLL (2003-04) P.161

⁶ R.S.Pathak ,*The Alienated Self in the Novels of Anita Desai*, *Indian Women Novelists* ,ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi, Prestige, 1991) Set.,Vol.2,P.11

⁷ Anita Desai *Journey to Ithaca* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal,1996) P.3

people which has captured the influence and fascination of the orientalism. The Novel highlights a different shade of Desai feminine sensibility in the reflection of the revolt of the two female characters done against their surroundings: Sophia and Laila.

Sophia remains in search of worldly pursuits and freedom, while Laila has her aspirations for the spiritual freedom. Anita Desai holds the view that all the religions of the world mingle into a single stream, representing the religion of humanity as shown in Laila's character. She also focuses on the path how to bring about the spiritual change in man and-"attains a harmonious, clear vision of India, a sense of delighted, joyous and serene fulfillment."⁸

Thus, it can be very briefly concluded to say on the ground of the above discussion that Anita Desai has very boldly exposed the issues of the gender-discrimination and the various shades and colours of her feminine sensibility through the portrayal of her different female-protagonists in her different novels as mentioned earlier in detail in this paper. Being a woman, she much better understands the various issues and problems of a woman crept up in the female world in this conservative patriarchal Indian Society where a woman has to come across different tough challenges in every walk of life for the preservation of her own identity, dignity, liberty, self-esteem.

Her novel *Cry, the Peacock* exposes the hollowness and injustice of the patriarchal society where Maya has to suffer the matrimonial frustration and sexual dissatisfaction along with her life-partner Gautama. As a great feminist she does communicate a message to all of us that woman is not a puppet playing into the hands of her male-partner. She too has her own self-esteem, love, honour and dignity.

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⁸Rama Kundu, *Journey to the East Once Again*; Anita Desai, *s Journey to Ithaca*, Critical Responses to

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