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Spirituality in Indian English Fiction with Special Reference to Anita Desai

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Abstract:

Today, we live in a materialistic world. Human values and virtues are at their lowest ebb. Embracing materialism whole-heartedly the whole world is heading towards utter destruction. Self-belief and belief in the Almighty is dwindling. Unless and until we resurrect the faith in our own selves and in God, it will be tough to achieve progress. In such a scenario attaining peace will also be a daunting task. This is Spiritualism.

The very belief that the spirit is the prime element of reality – Spiritualism is evident in the works of almost all the major Indian English novelists. From the works of Mulk Raj Anand to R.K. Narayan's to that Raja Rao a lot has been said and written on spiritualism. Following in their footsteps, Anita Desai has carved a name for herself in presenting the spiritual aspect of the characters in her works.

Keywords: Anita Desai, Spiritualism, Life, Indian, Fiction.

Introduction

In the words of Swami Vivekananda:

That one eternal religion is applied to different planes of existence, is applied to the opinions of various minds and various races. There never was my religion or yours, my national religion or your national religion; there never existed many religions, there is only the one. One infinite religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways. (Vivekananda, *My Master* 11)

Spiritualism is the belief in the existence of something which is beyond general human comprehension; which is at a higher plane than us. It is a wall which lends support to our lives and we can build our very existence on it. Adding meaning to our lives Spiritualism sustains human life.

The core theme of almost every Indian English writer before independence was Patriotism. Post 1947, the themes began to evolve. However with the Indo-China War of 1962 and the Indo-Pak conflicts of 1965 and 1971, patriotic themes once again hogged the limelight. This revival was more or less sporadic. A writer who can feel the joys and sorrows of the masses; a writer who can connect with the people is an authentic writer. Time as well as situation has changed. Hence, nationalism is no longer the pivotal theme anymore. The Indian English novelist has cast off old faiths and symbols, old values and sympathies. In this new era they no longer highlight the Rajas and their dying glory. They no longer write about the high-caste priests and their demi-gods. More often than not the protagonist in today's Indian English novel happens to be a farmer, a labourer, a factory worker, a patient, virtuous woman pitted against a ruthless zamindar or a callous, irascible man. His/her primary concerns are crusades against poverty, illiteracy, superstition, caste and sex.

All creative arts reveal a certain amount of truth. Critics on the contrary hold that an artist's main concern is with his/her own craft; social reform comes later. A shift from this accepted path is charged with didacticism. Comments on socio-political times are less expected from a lyric poet than from a novelist. It's because the novelist is more directly involved with the socio-political milieu. Hence he can relate better with the outer events and create lively scenery from the deep recesses of the human mind. A novel has the capability to serve a social responsibility by placing before the reader, the naked truth of the society; and that too from the society's viewpoint. Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the earliest social realists who always felt that a novelist is always wary of the wrong modes of projection of the didactic or ethical values rather than the values themselves.

Perhaps the most significant event in the history of Indian English fiction was the appearance on the scene of – Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao; the famous trio, during the nineteen thirties or the Gandhian Age. It was a landmark incident. They created a sound footing for our fiction. With their epoch-making creations, they helped the Indian English fiction to prosper.

Post-Independence Indian English fiction under the leadership of Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar and Khushwant Singh; retains the momentum which it had attained during the Gandhian Age. A noticeable development of this age is the birth of an entire school of women novelists. This emerging school was led by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai. They carried the rich legacy forward.

Spiritualism has been at the epicentre of famous works since the nineteen thirties. In the *Untouchable* (1935), Mulk Raj Anand brings Bakha back to his normal senses with the help of Mahatma Gandhi's spiritual message. Anand also portrays a fine reversal of the age-old myth of Sita, presented in the modern context; in his other works.

R.K. Narayan in his *The Dark Room* (1938) presents the helpless Hindu wife as Savitri. This name recalls the most typical wife of Hindu legend. In his *The English Teacher* (1945) the protagonist Krishnan establishes connection with the spirit of his dead wife Susila. Spiritualism is depicted in *The Guide* (1958) through the transformation of Raju. From a railway 'guide', Raju transforms himself into a half-reluctant and half-purposeful guru. A spiritual change of the entire being is delineated. The ancient Hindu fable of Bhasmasura, the Rakshasa, is re-told in the modern context in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961).

Raja Rao, one among the famous trio also delves into spirituality in his works. The traditional Harikatha – the legendary narrative of God is utilized by Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* (1938). He presents the Gandhian ideology through the Harikatha; and the medium is Moorthy. *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) illustrates the famous Shankaracharya's doctrine. Just as the rope is often wrongly regarded as the serpent, similarly the limited self is often considered as the individual soul – an aspect of God.

Bhabani Bhattacharya in *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1952) through a poor blacksmith, Kalo, presents the age-old truth that one cannot dismount the tiger of his own creation without ruining himself. But for the sake of mental peace he must dismount. Manohar Malgonkar's *Combat of Shadows* (1962) has its title and epigraph taken from the Bhagavad Gita. Similarly, the title and epigraph of other memorable works of Manohar Malgonkar have been drawn from the Ramayana.

Almost all the major socio-political changes and events in India during the 20th and the 21st century have been dealt with in these novels; either directly or indirectly. Several

critics maintain that the Indian English novel can be a major source for a systematic study of the cultural contrast and cultural change; with Indian at the centre of attention. This can also help the Westerners to increase their knowledge of India as well as of the acculturation processes. This assumption is not far from the truth. It points very strongly to the possibility of a successful study of Indian English novel from several points of view. Only through these novelists the West can understand and appreciate India's thought and feelings. Only through them the West can realise that India too has the same man and woman, with the same love and hatred, hopes and fears; despite cultural differences. A sense of spiritual unity across various cultures is delineated here. The Indian English novel is deeply grounded in actual reality of the day with its scenes and dialogue. It would not be wrong to assume that the historians would benefit immensely by reading the Indian English novel if modern Indian history were written.

Anita Desai (born-1937) is the youngest among the major Indian English women novelists. She focuses more on the spiritual aspect of human life as is evident in her numerous works. Anita Desai's works of fiction are mostly driven by women protagonists. She presents them in a lonely environment which is depicted as a kind of invaluable treasure. These women protagonists range from schoolgirl to grandmother. Hence we find these women at different stages in the respective lives. Almost all of them carry a fragile persona and their real bold character is trapped beneath their own skin. A cloud of emotional trauma engulf them, which sometimes lead to a fatal ending; a violent death.

Artificial use of language is the most damaging charge against the Indian English novelist. There exists a certain amount of truth in this charge. Since the argument put forth is why should the Indian characters speak in English, when they do not experience the world in English? The charge however is not fully irrefutable. Because what actually matters is how the writer experiences the character and not how the character experiences the character. Its authenticity is proved by the tone, texture and quality of the writer's creative writing through which he shares the unique experience.

In this manner the novelists have tackled and tried to successfully overcome this problem through their individual methods. Being fully conscious of this problem, both Anand and Bhattacharya deliberately experiment with language. They do so both in dialogue and narration. While on the other hand, writing for the upper class-elite, Nayantara Sahgal is not confronted with any such problem. Since that is the language of their daily usage. In her

novels the conversation between the Indian and the British in a foreign tongue is pleasing as well as satisfying. The fictional backdrop of Kamala Markandaya is the world outside India. Dealing primarily with the urban elite ensures her novel's safety from this basic and damaging charge.

As a result of this limitation, the wholesome achievement of an Indian English novelist is incomplete from an aesthetic point of view. It is difficult to achieve success in dialogue writing unless the Indian writer in English is exposed to the English idiom and the colloquialism of the English language as a spoken medium.

Despite immense success in character portrayals and descriptions, our novelists have not had as much success in dialogue-delivery. They have failed to create the throbbing feel of language in their dialogue. This is their key shortcoming and it surfaces prominently. The Indian English novelists are well aware of this handicap. But if their creation is to have any lasting significance, reshaping of their tools is need of the hour rather than arrogant dismissal of criticism.

Language is the medium of expression. It portrays life as it actually is. Hence any true novelist cannot exclude the prominent element of Indianness in the prose style of English language while delineating actual Indian life experiences. Anita Desai is one such novelist who is adept in this regard. Hence her works and the characters in them appear lively.

The dialogue of Indian English novelists, especially those of Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya, cannot be called natural. Anita Desai is a notable recent novelist who has earnestly tried to grapple with this problem. And she has also tasted success to a great extent. She has the prerequisites of any good art. She has imagination, vision as well as enthusiasm. Her works have depth and she deals with novel themes. Her striking originality makes her stand apart.

Humour is conspicuously absent in the Indian English novel. This is a noteworthy deficiency in general. We come across occasions of innocent laughter; which is either as a result of an incongruous situation or an utterly absurd scene. Social comedies by R.K. Narayan and Ruth Praver Jhabvala stand out. However, they produce successful satire, but not sheer, hilarious laughter. Exposing the ridiculous aspects of social customs and cultural peculiarity they bring about a jovial scene. The twin elements of humour and pathos should go hand in hand and not separately. But there is abundance of pathos and absence of genial

humour in the Indian English Fiction. In general this element is found lacking in Indian Literature; more so in the Indian English novel. This dearth of humour in Indian literature is understandable. It is perhaps because that innocent and sympathetic laughter either for the sheer fun of it or on one's follies and flaws is absent in Indian life itself.

Anita Desai is someone whose works are very akin to Spirituality. But this aspect can be easily overlooked by any casual reader. This beauty of spiritual aura can only be relished by a keen observer. In her 9th novel *Journey to Ithaca* (1995); Anita Desai displays her profound belief in Spiritualism distinctly. However in reality almost each and every fictional work of her carries a plethora of Spiritualism within itself. "Individual identity; Social conflict; Freedom and Responsibility; Familial Relationships", have generally been the topics of several research works on Anita Desai over the years. But Spiritualism still remains an aspect of her works which has been identified and highlighted the least.

In *Cry, The Peacock* (1963), the central character Maya is obsessed with death. She ends up murdering her husband in a fit of insane fury. A tale of alienated individuals is projected through Nirode and his two sisters Monisha and Amla – in *Voices In The City* (1965). In, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975) Sita runs away to a small island. Once again two alienated souls – Nanda and Raka confront each other in *Fire On The Mountain* (1977). Vimla, an elderly spinster is the centre of attention in *Clear Light of Day* (1980). In the above-mentioned novels, Anita Desai presents the trials, tribulations and suffering of her characters. A deeper spiritual presence is portrayed through this trial by fire.

On being observed from the surface these tales appear as a simple river of sorrows. But they carry fine spiritual pebbles, which are hidden deep beneath; and convey an entirely different story. This spiritual outlook makes Anita Desai stand apart. Such an orientation is reminiscent of similar spiritual concerns in various memorable novels such as E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) and Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941). Hence it can be safely stated that Anita Desai has provided a strong impetus and given a bold voice to the inner and spiritual part of human life.

"What is material and what is not? When the world is the end and God is the means to attain that end, that is material. When God is the end and the world is only the means to attain that end, spirituality has begun." (Vivekananda, *The Complete Works* 66) Swami Vivekananda tells us the difference between materialistic wealth and spiritual fortune. When

we focus our attention on the attainment of earthly pleasures; that is what materialism is. Praying to the Almighty with the ultimate aim of achieving things that only belong to this world is material. Hence Vivekananda advises us to fix our mind on that Spiritual Being who is beyond change. Through our righteous deeds, by performing our duties and by concentrating on that spiritual firmament we go one step nearer to the Ultimate Truth. This is what spiritualism is in actual sense. In other words spirituality is in the very effort to attain the Infinite Reality through the life that we lead in this mortal world. Only our rightful actions and by accepting every facet of life; both the lightness and the darkness, we come closer to the Almighty.

Anita Desai attempts to paint a scenic spiritual landscape in her novels. Her works are firmly grounded in the soil of Indian ethos and culture. This is the very source of her Spiritualism. The lively characters as well as the spiritual scenery makes her works appear unique.

An open hearted embrace of the materialistic outlook of today's world is pushing the entire mankind towards its own doom. Progress is uncertain in such a troublesome scenario. Peace and prosperity is rare and hard to establish for a longer duration of time. In the present confusing scenario the need of the hour is for man has to re-affirm his self-belief and unshakable faith in the Supreme Spiritual Being. The society as a whole has to turn towards Spiritualism for its betterment. This is the only positive and fruitful way forward for all.

God sends His choicest blessings through every single thing we come into contact with in this variegated creation. The Omniscient Being blesses all without any discrimination whatsoever. Anita Desai presents the all pervasive Spirituality through the characters in her works. This is a distinct spiritual dimension. It goes on to add a greater significance to her novels in the present scenario.

Conclusion

We find traces of Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf in the works of Anita Desai. There is a display of something raw and primitive on one hand and the exposition of a deep spiritual experience on the other. It makes her writings come alive. Anita Desai is not a profound believer in organised religion and its minute details. In spite of this she accepts the existence of a Superior Spiritual order. Owing to this belief the characters of her works stand at the threshold of supreme spiritual experience.

The best works are those which present a fusion of artistic and social purpose; and in which the themes rise above the didactic content to an artistic level. A novel is not carried forward by the message it conveys rather it's made vivid and poignant by the artistic presentation. The works of Indian English novelists and especially those of Anita Desai have immediacy to the society. It is the forte of Desai's creative art which goes to her credit.

Anita Desai has added an entirely new psychological dimension to Indian English fiction. She was probably the first Indian English novelist to be concerned primarily with the inner lives of her characters. She succeeds in beautifully capturing these fleeting moments of consciousness. With the permanence of art she preserves them forever. As a result she not only creates something of immense value for herself out of the endless flux of her own psyche but also provides for readers a golden opportunity to share this rich inner and spiritual life through her characters.

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