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Tribute to Anita Desai: The Writer in the Race

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Abstract:

As an authentic voice of Indian women novelists in English, Anita Desai stands tall with the Man Booker Prize that had at long last come to her through the hands of her daughter, Kiran Desai. Personally the prize had eluded her thrice. Yet she is what she is with or without the Booker. At the moment when the eyes of the world rest on Kiran Desai, this article aspires to capture Desai senior's certain literary traits that had helped her attain and retain an enviable place not only in the minds of the readers, but also in the history of Indian writing in English as well. The article is in fact a tribute paid to the writer for her impressive literary services.

Keywords: Cross – cultural identity, inside outsider, Non- Controversial Writer, Disciplined Writer, Committed Writer, self-dissatisfaction.

Introduction

In an era dominated by electronic media which has led to the downfall of the habit of reading on the whole, Anita Desai's ability to remain in the field as one of its most significant writers is in itself to be considered a great achievement. She had served the cause of Indian writing in English in a distinctive way, setting high standards for her successors to aim at and accomplish. Her works, like the works of great writers have always included the readers never shutting them out. Scholars have found her works a happy hunting ground posing interesting challenges to their literary potentialities. They always have found something interesting to talk about, to accept or reject; something new to contemplate upon in her novels. This paper aims at throwing light on certain factors governing the writings of Anita Desai that have helped her gain firm grip over the pulse of the Indian reading public that is supposed to be highly inconsistent in its tastes.

Cross –cultural identity of the writer: A blessing in disguise

Desai's father is a Bengali and her mother is a German. As even poor tools turn into magical equipments in the hands of a skilled laborer, this cross-cultural factor has proved to be an asset in the hands of this determined writer. Strictly and truly speaking 'Indianism' that is expected of every Indian writers in English, should have proved to be a tough target to this

‘inside outsider’. But surprisingly Desai’s novels carry a strong touch of Indian heart and mind. In fact, she is so much an Indian by spirit that at times even her non- Indian characters seem to express strong Indian sentiments. Critics, many in number have expressed their displeasure over ‘India’ as depicted in her novel *Fasting Feasting*. Yet the fact is, in every thought, in every action and in every sentiment expressed by the characters in the novel, the native fragrance is unmistakably present. Baumgartner’s *Bombay* and *Journey to Ithaca* the two novels that have shot up the image of the writer in the eyes of the world do not have Indian characters but they do certainly carry Indian Sentiments.

Baumgartner is a German Jew. The other novel *Journey to Ithaca* tells us the story of Matteo and Sophie, a German and an Italian respectively. The ease with which Anita Desai manages to present these characters in their native background is quite amazing. Though the need for a sense of belonging, search for roots and identity crisis happen to be the heart of these novels, the new background against which, the stories are set, help the writer break the monotony that easily creeps into the works of Indians writing in English. Desai should necessarily be given credit due to her, for ably exploiting her German background to serve her literary ends.

Desai as a Non- Controversial Writer

Anita Desai’s works evoke no sentimental shock in the readers. Shocking the conventions of the society is certainly not her style of writing. Unlike G.B. Shaw who showed keen interest in controversial issues like religion and politics, Desai keeps herself safely from controversies of any kind. Marital discord, Man-woman relationship, domestic disharmony, search for roots, need for a sense of belonging and the like are her pet themes. The world that her novels expose the readers to, is very limited. Religion and politics are essentially very sensitive topics in secularist country like India. They provide the necessary background for *Journey to Ithaca* and Baumgartner’s *Bombay* respectively. But the writer has very cleverly and consciously handled it with due care and concern that no body is unjustly hurt or unduly honoured. Search for spiritual light is the core of the novel *Journey to Ithaca*. Matteo and Sophie, come to India in search of the same. Matteo had always believed that material pleasure is no real pleasure at all. So he finds it easy to surrender himself to the demands of his search for light. Sophie, on the other hand, believes in domestic bliss. She urges her husband to return to Germany. Matteo, who had just then found his guru in the mysterious mother, refuses to do so and this puts their relationship into an acid test.

Like a typical Indian woman, Sophie turns herself into a guardian angel to her children who were blindly forsaken by their feverish father. She aspires to give good education to them. Matteo’s indifference only strengthens her ambition. Thus the readers find the novelist paying her primary attention to the changing relationship, leaving the spiritual element of their search to remain subjective ambitions of the concerned characters. Sophie, who ventures to show her husband the real colour of Mother, goes in search of her roots. The journey becomes the common element. While the husband undertakes his journey towards the Mother, the wife involves herself in a journey against the Mother. Ithaca is unreachable as

it is non-existent. So Journey to Ithaca is an endless journey to eternity. It is the endlessness of the journey that is being narrated by the writer. Sophie succeeds in her search by finding every thing and nothing about the mother. She continues her search. Matteo, the believer, after the demise of his guru returns to Germany to play hide and seek with his son. Quit understandably religion happens to be the heart of the whole experience but Desai manages to push it back to the stage of secondary importance, giving prominence to individuals and their relationship with one another.

Grand parents concern for their orphan-like grand children, the children's innocent expectations, mother's true concern for the safety and security of her children, her helplessness over their father's indifference and father's inexplicable return are all the points that dominate the novel. Spiritual light ? Who is worried? The narration has taken such a strong root of sentiments that readers tend to wait more for family reunion than for the supposed bliss. Will Sophie return to her family? is more disturbing a question than would she find her light?

Baumgartner's Bombay shows only thin, inadequate references to the political background that throws a rich merchant Jew out of Germany to lead a rootless battle with ruthless fate in India. The pathetic plight of the Jews was certainly heart rending. In their land they were dark and therefore were refused an identity. In India they were too white and so considered a 'firenghi'. Anita Desai, very effectively portrays the situation. *Accepting but not accepted; that was the story of his life*. In Germany he had been dark - his darkness had marked him the Jew. In India he was fair and that marked him "firenghi", in both the lands unacceptable.

Baumgartner accepts both Germany and India. When the Indian national flag was hoisted on Independence Day, he smiles pleasingly, not knowing why. But the tragedy is that India refuses to accept him. In Bombay, miles away from Germany, Baumgartner is worried about the state of affairs in Germany for the Jews. Germany refuses him. Britishers consider him a German and arrest him; the torture is thus double fold for Baumgartner. Politics is essentially the heart of the novel but Desai makes no long mention of Hitler's doctrine or Churchill's philosophy. She is too seriously concerned with the plight of the individual to permit politics to dominate. Baumgartner's love for his mother and motherland stays to be the focal point of the author. So much so, that Baumgartner in the end dies only in the hands of a German lad. Political turmoil that was tormenting India leaves him untouched, to die in the hands of his brother from his home land.

In Clear light of Day, Raja and Bim feel greatly relieved to know that Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead not by a Muslim but by a Hindu. They were genuinely worried over the safety of their Muslim neighbors.

Bye Bye Black Bird differs in many ways from the other works of Anita Desai. East is East and West is West is the point that the entire novel takes the readers to. Dev, a Bengali in order to join London School of Economics comes to England and stays with Adit. He

proves to be an Anglo phoebe while his friend Adit remains to be an Anglophile. But both were called “Wags” or Macaulay’s bastards. Dev feels it highly insulting to see London docks having three kinds of lavatories, Ladies, Gents and Asiatic. But Adit somehow manages to pocket all these insults and continue to enjoy English prosperity. But reversal of fortune brings in a drastic change in the attitude of Dev and Adit. Dev manages to find a job for himself as a sales man in a bookshop. Adit, in his mother –in –law’s countryside house begins to see how foolish it was to think that he belongs to any other land than India. Sarah, the white wife of Adit who had lost her identity on account of her marrying an Indian, notices the change in her husband’s frame of mind. When Adit expresses his desire to return to his land and to have his child born in his India, she readily agrees. Quite understandably, this certainly is a material for serious irony and strong satirical attacks. But Desai’s gentle conscious handling of the subject enables an Indian and an English reader to be equally at ease with the work. This ability of the writer to veer away from controversial portrayal certainly accounts for her popularity.

Anita Desai - A Disciplined Writer

Steady deterioration in the taste of the reading public has almost made it obligatory on the part of the writers to deal with sex and violence in excess merely to be in the swim. Veena Paintal can be quoted as an example to show how pressure works on a writer. Paintal was Desai’s contemporary. Her first novel Roshini was an instant success like Desai’s first work, Cry, the Peacock. Roshini was published in the year 1966, three full years after the publication of Desai’s work Cry, the Peacock. It introduced Paintal to the literary world as a writer of great promise. But what made her write a novel like Midnight woman is still an unsolved mystery. It was about a Delhi prostitute, Vaishali and the book opens with her violent murder and the rest of it goes on to show Vaishali as a nymphomaniac. Her exploits with different men, right from her adolescent years to the present are described in a vivid pornographic detail. The book seems to be written hastily as if to meet the need of the public, which craves for sex, crime and something of the heat and blood of life. Now, this has happened with great many writers of real skill. Only strong writers like Desai manage to guard themselves against such cheap survival. Sex and violence, like religion and politics are essentially an integral part of our life. A writer, who intends to depict life in its true, crude form, can certainly not do away with it. Yet in the portrayal of these realities of life, Anita Desai adopts professional ethics in Cry, the Peacock. Maya’s sexual starvation is being given an effective expression in her passionate reference to thirsty peacocks.

I felt their thirst as they gazed, at the rain clouds, their passion as they hunted for their mates. With them I trembled and panted and paced the burring rocks. Agony, agony, the mortal agony of their cry for lover and for death. I wept for them and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine.
(C.P.p. 97)

The burning forehead and the parching tongue of Maya leaves nothing unsaid out of shame. Dropping her sari once she invites Gautama close to her “soft willing body and lonely wanting mind,” But Gautama, being sleepy, misses the point entirely. On another occasion,

lying close to him in order to plead with him to take her to Darjeeling, Maya was aware of something that Gautama was not.

I turned upon my side, closer to him. Conscious of the swell of my hips that rose under the white sheet which fell in sculptured folds, about my rounded form. His eyes, remained blank of appraisal of any response. It was as though he had seen only what he had expected to see, nothing less. Nothing more what cause for excitement then? (p 43)

This is only one of many such attempts that Maya makes to draw Gautama to bed.

Anita Desai portrays it from a very decent angle in decently touching language helping the readers to realize the crudeness in Gautama's refusal than the lusty longing in Maya's invitation.

In Baumgartner's Bombay Baumgartner's relationship with Lotte is not devoid of sex. They use one another to get their thirst quenched. Their inexplicable affection for one another, in a way reveals their unsatisfied love for their mother land. One takes the other for 'Something of German Soil'

Journey to Ithaca depicts some crude experience of Sophie in Gova. But the journey that she has involved herself in is so tough and so incomprehensible that such bleak deviations are to be taken for harsh, inevitable facts of life. But on a different occasion, when a stranger invites her openly, first in person and then over phone, she rejects and feels unhappy about the way freedom is misused. In comparison, she feels that blind surrender in ashram to unscientific beliefs is far better.

Sita of *Where shall we Go this summer?* only once at the mental level, indulges in an act of infidelity when she takes on unusual interest in a hitchhiker. But this undesirable indulgence serves a different purpose. It helps the readers to appreciate the honesty of Raman better.

Bye Bye Black Bird, In custody, Village by the Sea, Fasting Feasting and all her short stories are totally free from sex and violence. In a short story that appeared in *Diamond Dust and other stories* published in 2000, titled 'Roof Top Dwellers', we find a young, ambitious beautiful girl, staying all alone in barsaty (roof top) in the crowded city of Delhi she works as a sub – editor for a literary magazine, Books owned by a politician - Nothing wrong happens to Moyna. Tara, the chief editor and her friend asks her very seriously not to travel by common bus as it would be unsafe. Few come dangerously close to enjoy a pinch and run for their lives, she says. Tara's husband who pays frequent visit to the rooftop proves to be a perfect gentle man. So is the auto driver. Moyna smokes and drinks gin once when suddenly Tara hosts a party. This is the maximum that she does to enjoy her new woman image. She even asks Tara not to bring men to her rooftop for fear of what the people might think.

In *Cry, the Peacock* Maya grows restless in the cabaret show and says to her stressing upon the vulgarity. “This is my bosom and these are my legs. Here is my bottom; pinch it, liked it... help yourself.” she concludes saying.

It was perverse, it was wrong but it was a fact that had been taken for the truth. Values were distorted in the macabre half – light ... at an hour when those values would have been all important.(p.86)

Here Maya is used as the mouth piece of the author. Her views are the views of the author herself. Violence also finds its place in the novels of Anita Desai. Deaths by unnatural means are quite common in her dismal world. The big thud with which Gautama falls would still be ringing in the ears of the readers of *Cry, the Peacock*. The heat of the fire that burns Monisha wouldn't have been fully extinguished from the memories of the readers of *Voices in the City*. Preet Singh's appearance and disappearance of old Ila Das and her long preserved chastity would still be lingering in the minds of the readers of *Fire on the Mountain*. Baumgartner's brutal death wouldn't have been forgotten either. The Death of 'Monisha in *Voices in the City* and of Anamika in *Fasting Feasting* shall remain fresh for long in the minds of the readers. But these are tragic wastes that serve some purpose; like the tragic wastes that we come across in the plays of Shakespeare. This efficiency of Desai to employ sex and violence, decently to drive home her points had certainly helped her to stay as a descent writer in the minds of the readers.

Desai as a Committed Writer

The lone individual is the literary target of Anita Desai. She probes deep into the psychic state of such individuals and skillfully brings out the terror of sheer existence. She is very much different from the top three Indian writers in English namely Raja Rao Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan. While these writers showed their concern for Social order directly, Desai takes a deliberate detour. Through individuals she tries to reach the society. Social evils do not escape the artistic eyes of the author but she prefers to look at them not as a social reformer but as a psychiatrist. Her pet themes are themes that evoke universal interest. Existentialistic predicament of man, his relationship with women, marital discord and domestic disharmony are certainly themes of common human concern forever.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it may be said that Desai's strength as a writer is in her ability to restrict herself to her strengths. She certainly has a thorough knowledge of what, as an artist she is capable of and what she is incapable of. Further more she seems to have gained a good understanding of the pulse of the readers. Success shall never be elusive to those who work with artistic integrity. Desai definitely does. In one of her several interviews, Desai has said that if she could opt for it, she would like to disown most of her writings. This self-dissatisfaction of the writer speaks of the high target she had set for herself; the height she wanted to reach and maintain. This unquenchable thirst on her part as a writer is probably responsible for Desai being what she is today. Fifty-three years after the publication of her

masterpiece *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai stands tall as one of the towering personalities in the history of Indian writing in English. Her latest work *The Artist of Disappearance* shows that as a writer, she had grown over the years and is willing to go long way still.

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