

THE CONDITION OF INDIAN WOMAN IN ANITHA DESAI'S FASTING FEASTING

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ABSTRACT

Indian women writers in recent decades have produced abundant literary output. These writers probe into human relationship since it is closely connected with the mind and heart. In order to make the process of change smooth and really meaningful, women writers have taken upon them-selves this great task of their crusade against established traditions. It is only after the Second World War that women novelists of quality have begun enriching Indian fiction in English. Of these writers, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai are unquestionably the most outstanding.

A large number of critical articles and some full length studies with regard to the two writers have appeared individually. However, except for an article or two, not many studies have attempted a comparative analysis of married Indian women in the novels of these two writers. They are ready for sacrificing themselves. They move from self denial to self – assertion and from self negation to self affirmation. Hence, this study seeks to examine the portrayal of married women by these two contemporary Indian women novelists. The thrust of the study is on the depiction of women in particular because the protagonists are women in almost all of their novels chosen for study. Three novels of each writer in particular, which are relevant for the study, have been taken to assert the title, An Indian Wife. The novels that are taken up for the study are: '*Nectar in a Sieve*', '*A Handful of Rice*' and '*Some Inner Fury*' by Kamala Markandaya and '*Cry, the Peacock*', '*Clear Light of Day*' and '*Fasting Feasting*' by Anita Desai.

This present topic presents the synoptic views of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya's portrayal of women in terms of the shifting sensibilities and changing attitudes of married Indian women. It also tries to analyze the portrayal of women characters that belong to rural and urban upper classes of Indian society. As an artist Kamala Markandaya's fiction is concerned with

change in feminine sensibility brought about by the social, economic and cultural forces, whereas Anita Desai's major concern is about exploration of the psychological condition of the oppressed hyper-sensitive women. This study is an attempt to analyze various married women characters against the background of important aspects of woman's life – marriage, migration, motherhood and midlife. Unfortunately, some women in search of their identity alienate themselves from the realities of human life. They fail to establish harmonious human relationships with people around. The reasons for such failures have been delineated convincingly in the writings of both the writers.

The prime concern of Anita Desai has been the exploration of the inner selves of her married women protagonists, who are always in search of their identity, where as Kamala Markandaya attempts to focus on the inborn superior characteristic features of the Indian wife, who tries to keep the family ties intact. Her first novel '*Nectar in a Sieve*' treats the theme of hunger and starvation in Indian villages. It depicts the rural life of the south India. It reflects the real condition of peasant woman and farmers in the light of contemporary India. It tells the story of India that what the picture of India was after the independence. It shows the difficulties, suffering, disasters, desolation and problems of Indian peasants.

For the first time, Kamala Markandaya dramatizes the East –West conflict. It is a novel of violence and destruction. Essentially, it is a political novel. It is also a tragic novel like '*Nectar in a Sieve*'. The novel deals with political passions prevailing over love and justice. The clash between passion and patriotism is presented in the novel. The Inner Fury is suggestive of Indian passion for independence. Kamala Markandaya's second novel '*Some Inner Fury*' is entirely different from '*Nectar in a Sieve*'. Her novels can be examined as the manifesto of female predicament. She has deep psychological insight into her characters. Her novels reveal feministic concerns with the predicament of women in male dominated society. Most of the women novelists are concerned with human relationship, social realities and woman's predicament. Every writer is the product of the age in which he/she writes and Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai are no exception in this respect. In the realm of literature, they are one of the most famous of the modern Indian writers.

What is true of women writers is equally true of all women in general. A small noise gone unheard by man may be a big bang for woman. Any small incident of bloodshed or violence may cause rupture in her. All these thoughts and emotions are genuinely handled by both the writers. In her novel '*Clear Light Of Day*'. Anita Desai explores two sisters' very different positions within the home, the family and the post independence upper middle class Indian society, which lead to one woman's leaving and the other women staying in the homeland and the domestic sphere.

The novel tells the story of an anglicized upper middle-class Indian family from the 1940s to the 1970s. The protagonist Bim Das is an unmarried elder sister who as young woman at the time of partition must take the place of her dead parents as guardian of her siblings and custodian of the crumbling family home in Delhi. She has to sacrifice her personal interest and dreams to take care of an autistic brother and an alcoholic aunt after her older brother Raja leaves the family to pursue a future of his own. Her younger sister Tara eventually marries a diploma and escapes the suffocating paralysis of the family home for Europe and America. Desai describes Bim's efforts to expand her identity beyond the pseudo - motherhood she has had to take up and to come to terms with a family and society that often curb those efforts. The novel culminates in the two sisters' painful attempts to make sense of the ways in which family and home have shaped their perceptions of themselves and each other. Alienation and east-west, cultural encounter is the theme of her another.

'*Cry, the Peacock*' is Maya's story, the story of her married life with Gautam, and almost the entire story is "remembrance of things past" by Maya herself. The novel begins with the death of Maya's pet dog, Toto and how it affects her. It was not the pet's death alone that she mourned, but another sorrow, unremembered perhaps yet not even experienced. Her husband Gautam is a busy, prosperous, lawyer. He is cultured, rational, practical and too much engrossed in his own affair to meet the demands, of his young wife physically, mentally and emotionally. As a girl she had gone with her Ayah to an astrologer with albino eyes, and he had prophesied unnatural death four years after her marriage to either husband or wife! And it is four years now. The prophecy gets hold of Maya like the prophecy of the witches upon Macbeth.

Rescue from this could have been possible, had Gautam tried, but he was too lost in his own world of temperament and interest. And one day there is a dust storm followed by a few drops of rain and they go up to the roof. The pale moon has risen, and Maya is fascinated and bewitched; they are at the low parapet's edge, and when inadvertently Gautam moves in front of her, thereby hiding the moon from view, Maya waxes into a sudden frenzy and pushes him over the parapet to "pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom". Three days later, Gautam's mother and sister take her to her father's house at Lucknow, and it is tacitly understood that she will have to be put in an asylum. In the novel, *Bye Bye Blackbird*, Desai depicts the growing sense of immigrant sensibility in this novel through three different yet related characters Dev, Adit and his English wife Sara.

The disillusionment, the frustration, the despair, the dilemma, the longing, and the hopelessness of the female world can best be seen from such women writers. Being a woman the writers has also given justification to female world by writing about them. We can see all her novels handle the story of family-drama which is mostly played by the female characters. This shows that Anita Desai has used the theme of escape to explore the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience. By the technique, she has tried to show that women are not born, they are made. She takes women not as a biological species but culturally defined characteristics.

Anita Desai's projection of women-characters in her novels shows her first-hand experience about the female world with all its facets. In her art of characterization, she has put more light on the emotional or internal world of female-class than the external. She has seen the world through the eyes of very Indian women, not through the eyes of intellectual woman with western education. The female characters that show her sincerity to the class dominate all her novels. She succeeds to portray complex nature of women through her creations of Maya, Sita, Monisha, Nanda Kaul, Bimla, Tara, and Mira Masi. She has explored the unconscious as well as conscious parts of women, and given the presentation through experience.

The suffering of Indian women, marital disharmony, existentialism, anger, dual tradition all find a place in the novels of Anita Desai. She has given a great deal of contribution in

bringing forth light of women and has shown a glimpses into the world's heart which had laid concealed from outer world. The disillusionment, the frustration, the despair, the dilemma, the longing, and the hopelessness of the female world can best be seen from such women writers. Kamala Markandaya has seen both East and West as she has lived in England and in India for a long period. In her novels particularly in '*Nectar in a Sieve*' and '*A Handful of Rice*' she has portrayed the conflicts and tensions between these two opposite ways of life. She presents the conflict of these two different cultures with a rare penetration, under-standing and realism. Men, as well as women characters in her fiction, react in different ways to the Indian culture and Western culture.

Indian women writers in recent decades have produced abundant literary output. These writers probe into human relationship since it is closely connected with the mind and heart. In order to make the process of change smooth and really meaningful, women writers have taken upon them-selves this great task of their crusade against established traditions. It is only after the Second World War that women novelists of quality have begun enriching Indian fiction in English. Of these writers, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai are unquestionably the most outstanding. Many women writers have tried their hands in the field of fiction/novels. Earlier, novels focused the social and political issues of the society. There were stereotyped productions or portrayal of women characters and their roles. It is also true that they were mostly produced by male novelists. Therefore, they were the lopsided presentation because they reflected the views, estimation of women from the understanding of men. They were the reflections of the male opinions and experiences. After sometime the scenario has changed. The novelists desired to expose the society and express the psychology of people.

It explores one of contemporary society's myths, the myth of food. Individual models rest upon the unchallenged authority of the "collective models which are the media, Hollywood and TV": one needs to be healthy, beautiful, wealthy, intelligent and thin. These models also provoke passionate political discussions, which - as Girard puts it - have become evident "in the frenzy for scandals that dominates our globalised world". Hence exclusion of and violence against all those who do not fit these models, i. e. who appear inferior with respect to physical aspect, wealth or intelligence. This is not to be understood in terms of either abundance or shortage,

opposite poles of a process which always has accompanied human evolution. Nowadays the opposite poles are renunciation and excess which highlight our stereotyped relationship with our body, the ambiguity of our behaviour towards food, as well as the association of the latter with our desire.

The present trend to renunciation and excess rests, as Girard writes, on a logic “of oscillation between all or nothing – which is the result of hysterical competition”. I suppose that this trend is not peculiar to Western culture only but this contagion has infiltrated social life on all its levels, local and global ones alike. One cannot but ask the following questions: why is all this? What is the origin of the myth of food? Which is the relation between our food behaviour and stereotypes of persecution? What are the reasons of eating disorders, that accompany our mythological justification of renunciation or excess? These questions open to several perspectives, which are aesthetic, anthropological and philosophical.

Fasting and feasting, renunciation and excess, simple variations of the same disorder, are also key words in a novel by Anita Desai (a contemporary Indian writer) where it is possible to trace out desire and to analyse the scandalising effects of imitation.

Challenging the current myth of food we can choose between two theoretical models: 1) the reductive model which singles out “favourite institutional scapegoats”, such as political institutions, family and society at large, as well as psychological aspects, following a mechanistic and rationalistic logic; 2) the model that puts in relation the myth of food and the connected violent process of exclusion to the dynamics of mimetic desire and to human relationships, following a complex and relational logic. I shall follow Renè Girard using his notions of mimetism and victimisation, with reference to globalisation.

The main points of my paper follow in this order: Stereotypes of persecution and scandal of food — Myth of food and globalisation — Passion for food: renunciation and excess.

Life is a curious thing. It offers an abundance of experiences and opportunities, yet each individual has a different perspective. In Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*, the exchange student from India, Arun, is perplexed by the tradition his American family is determined to keep of going to the beach. His adventure is described by the detailed imagery, light humor, and abrupt

syntax to create a comical situation. Figurative language adds a new level of excitement to the story. The scene comes to life as Arun notes Melanie is “dressed in her bathing suit with a big shirt drawn over shoulders.” The employment of these minute details make the story believable, even relatable. The imagery of Mrs. Patton’s “radiant, lipsticked smile” connotes a confident and all-American mother who is eagerly awaiting the beach. However, while he is anticipating the event, Arun “finds the hair on the back of his neck begin to prickle.” The palms of his hands are becoming puffy and damp.” This imagery cannot be mistaken of anything but extremes nervousness and a fear for the unknown.

Desai also uses humor to characterize this infamous trek to the beach. Although the weekends normally marked by the welcoming absence of school or a job,” Arun cannot plead work” to his chagrin. He even begin frantically grasping for “excuses” to not go. On the heels of enthusiastic Mrs. Patton, both Melanie and Arun “try to lag behind her.” Unfortunately and comically, Melanie “can lag even better” than Arun who prefers the town’s “post office” to the “grasses stirring with insidious life” in the paths to the beach... The sparse and concise sentences create an uncomfortable atmosphere of the unknown, for this is exactly how Arun feels. The statement, “It is Saturday.” Shows Arun’s dejection over the fact that he must do something as pleasurable as going to the beach. Similar syntax follows through the rest of the passage, such as :IT is an awkward problem,” or “But there are not birds to be see, not animals. : Although the reader gets a senses of detachment while reading the passage, it is necessary to experience the same emotions and thought process of Arun. This type of stream-of-consciousness writing allows for figurative language, which otherwise might sound too flowery or out of place.

The similes and metaphors describe Arun’s trepidant journey as he experiences the wide life around him. The cicadas sound as if “the sun is playing on their sinews” as if they were small harps suspended in the trees.” This beautiful and dream-like musical quality frightens Arun. He is absolutely beyond his comfort level. His entire journey is characterized through the use of images, with, economical sentences, and beautiful metaphors. At a deeper level, Arun experiences American with his foreign perspective from India. In the excerpt from Anita Desai’s Fasting, Feasting the exchange student Arun is unsettled and troubled by the novel experience of going to the beach. Literary techniques, like point of view, reveal Arun’s angst in

exploring the outside realm of nature with his host family. His sense of uncomfortable disorientation heightens as he struggles to reconcile American customs with the vast expanse of an out-of town experience.

The passage adopts a third-person limited viewpoint which fluctuates at points to reveal Arun's nervousness and position of awkwardness. The simple diction of the first paragraph immediately reveals that Arun is out of place. He "cannot plead work" as she could back in India, because it is a weekend and thus, the eternal conflict manifests itself. The poor exchange student has yet to acclimate himself with his America family. Negative connotations in the first paragraph are rife, from "despondent" to "wildly," Arun frantically attempts to "find excuses," amplifying his desire not to leave home. The repetition of "no" reveals the emphatic nature of Mrs. Patton. Her ultimatum progresses the plot onwards toward the beach.

As they prepare the supplies and set off, Mrs. Patton exudes an almost comical air of ebullience. The vivid imagery of her "animated prance galvanizing her dwindled shanks" offers some comic relief to this uncomfortable situation. Key adverbs, like "silently," indicate the tension and are still festering within Arun. The Indian student's discomfort is heightened at his confusion about how to avoid being "close together" to Melanie. These subtle actions indicate a nervous tension between the two characters, a tension that traces its roots back to Indian customs of propriety. The rhetorical question, "But who is to follow whom," shifts the perspective to that of Arun. He admits that it is an awkward problem, a "and his overburdened conscience debates whether he should help "carry those baskets" to preclude the awkwardness of walking with Melanie.

As the group continues on, the contrast drawn between Mrs. Patton and Arun becomes obvious. As she goes "confidently forwards" and begins singing, Arun, juxtaposed with her natural actions, appears even more out of place. Approaching the woods, the group is greeted by a vast array of imagery. The visual imagery of "soft pine needles, combined with the auditory "thrumming" of cicadas and "bird shrieks" clashes with Arun's concept of tranquility. Paradoxically, this cacophony of sounds has no roots, as "no birds" are "to be seen, nor animals."

Arun is overwhelmed by these present circumstances. Tactile imagery reveals that Arun's "hair on the back of his neck" begins to prickle and his palms become "puffy and damp." Arun is disoriented by this experience, and the fear is heightened when he raises a rhetorical question; "Why must people live in the vicinity of such benighted wilderness and become a part of it?" The perspective once again shifts to that of first-person, portraying Arun's reasoning and preference. He feels at home in town and enjoys its quaint offerings, like "its post office" and "its shops." The author then contrasts the homely image with a metaphor of the untamed wilderness, an alliterative "creeping curtain of insidious green." The deadly diction of "insidious," "poisonous," and "pale" reveal indirectly that Arun is thoroughly not enjoying this experience. Rather than relaxing, he has been dislocated from a place of comfort and forced to enjoy the pernicious wilderness

Arun's experience in going to the beach and walking through the path can be described as uncomfortable, unpleasant and enlightening for Arun. The point of view of the narration is third person but there is vast knowledge of Arun's own thoughts and feelings. Arun is already reluctant to go and there seems to be tension between Arun and Melanie. The narrator subtly reveals this with the rhetorical question "But who is to follow whom?" This also makes the experience Arun is facing more relatable by engaging the audience. The point of view is unique in that though it refers to Arun in third person, it is as though the thoughts are his own. "He ought to help carry those baskets anyway." This statement is said through the opinion of Arun it seems. It is difficult to put a name on the point of view as well. The point of view, "it," bounces back and forth from distant narration to almost direct quote from Arun himself. "Why must people live in the vicinity of such benighted wilderness and become a part of it?" This question is Arun's own.

There is little dialogue in this excerpt, apart from the mother as she makes him join them to the beach and as she sings. But, there is "speech" within the narration. Like I mentioned before, the point of view of the narrator illuminates Arun's own thoughts so in a sense, Arun is speaking himself. There is also speech within the animals. The cicadas "shrill" and the birds "shriek." What the people lack in dialogue, the animals make up for in noise. The animal's "speech" irritates Arun, causing him to further dislike wilderness. The unique perspective and speech

allows the reader to engage and understand Arun's awkwardness and disdain for the wilderness. It also enlightens to Arun that he is content with the city, and that he prefers to be civilized.

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