

Chapter-6

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The present research work shows a comparative study between Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy, regarding the depiction of the predicament of women in their works. Both the novelists have distinctly placed themselves in the world literary canon. Through their writings they have successfully brought forward something new, rarely dealt with, especially regarding the position of women in India. They both believe that even today in the age of advancement, women are still oppressed and have not been able to assert their independence in the male dominated society. Both Desai and Roy have dealt the theme of ‘women predicament’ by observing and analyzing their miserable plight and have taken two different visions into account— psychological and social.

Anita Desai, being a sensitive writer and the champion of psychological novels among the Indo-Anglian writers, has dealt with the theme of human psychology to discover the inner self of her characters. Bipin. P. Panigrahi in *Self Apprehension and Self Identity in Clear Light of Day* explicitly remarks that , “the novels of Anita Desai depict extreme situations arising out of conflicts in the inner configurations of the individuals—the conflict between reason and instinct, the will and reality, involvement and detachment. These conflicts revolve round the interplay of the ‘self’ with others” (74). Thus, the focus of Desai’s novels is the ‘self’, the psychology of an individual. Anita Desai emerged as a trend-setter in the realm of Indo-Anglian fiction. A.V. Krishna Rao in *The Indo –Anglian Novel and the Changing Tradition* considers Desai as the writer who welcomes the “creative release of the feminine sensibility” (50). Her real concern is nothing more than the exploration of human psyche. Desai’s innovations as D.S. Maini in *The Achievement of Anita Desai* make her “a disturbing and demanding presence in Indo-Anglian fiction.”(216) Anita Desai moves away from the main tradition of characterization followed by Anand, Narayan, Bhattacharya,

Malgonkar, and Markandaya who largely depended on the social and economic background, physical features, dress and behaviour of a person. For Raja Rao and Nayantara Sahgal, the philosophical and political ideas dominated other traits of characters. What matters for Anita Desai is not philosophical or social ideas of a character but only characters, their motivation, their consciences and consciousness and their tensions. The study of human beings and that too, an inward journey, rather than outer and known, in Desai's novels have successfully drawn the attention of readers worldwide. Desai's writings depict, as K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in *A Note on Anita Desai's Novels* points out, is "the exploration of sensibility –the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is ill at ease."(64). In her novels, she preferably deals with the feminine sensibility of her women characters that restrict them to have a blessed relationship with men. Characters depicted by Desai generally belong to the urban setup - educated and from a well to do family, who still find the problem of adjustment and adaptability and hence suffer throughout the novel. The problem of her characters is 'existential' and not social or political. She herself confesses that, she has not written "the kind of social document that demands the creation of realistic and typical characters and the use of realistic and typical dialogue"(Dhawan 233).Anita Desai after 1980's tried her hand in writing novels that deal with the East-West encounter, India-Pakistan Partition etc., but her sole concern has been the exploration of the psychological problems with which her characters struggle and suffer in their everyday life. Thus, Desai as a champion of psychological novels is well suited and confined to the psychological field than the social, political and economic. Having indulged deeply into the psychological conflict between the real and the imaginary, Desai's characters behave and react differently from the common lot of people. They appear to be eccentric and imaginary beings. Anita Desai herself confesses that her characters are not real. Jasbir Jain in *Stairs to the Attic* explicitly remarks that:

Anita Desai is concerned with the portrayal of psychological reality and as such prefers characters who are peculiar and eccentric rather than general.

Hence most of her major characters are not from real life but 'are either entirely imaginary or an amalgamation of several different characters. (68)

Thus, Anita Desai in her novel deals with typical characters and almost all her characters develop a world of fantasy, an imaginary world and find difficult to survive if anything appears in contrast to their self constructed world.

Contrary to her, Arundhati Roy appears on the literary scene, with her single novel, *The God of Small Things*, a social document exposing the real life story of a small village in Kerala. All the characters in the novel are from the common lot of people who suffer miserably, especially women and the downtrodden in the society. Although it seems difficult to compare one novel of Roy with many novels of Anita Desai, but it is the excellence of Arundhati Roy as a writer that in her single novel, *The God of Small Things* she has presented almost all the factors that affect the life of an individual. She has described in detail about the prudish notions of the family and society that subjugate women and the weak (Untouchables). The story of the novel deals with what Roy has experienced and observed in her growing years at Ayemenem, the village where the story revolves, depicting the ruthless social, cultural, economic and familial structure.

Arundhati Roy's focal point in the novel is women predicament at the hands of men, who never feel women equivalent to them. In "Arundhati Roy's, *The God of Small Things*: A Study in Feminine Sensibility and Aspects of Style," critic Pratibha Verma remarks that 'This novel deals with how the lives of women are controlled by men. We learn that the women are repressed and "denied basic amenities" since they live in a patriarchal society, defined as "a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (180). Roy in her novel has presented the presence of patriarchal norms in the

society that are deep rooted in our Indian soil from the ancient times. Patriarchy is a social and political system, framed and decorated by men to exercise their power over women. *The God of Small Things* presents the ‘Saga’ of three generations and a gradual weakening of the patriarchal norms and emancipation of women with each succeeding generation. In “*Arundhati Roy’s and Salman Rushdie’s Postmodern India*,” critic Victor J. Ramraj remarks that:

The first generation is from the period before India’s independence: characters such as Mammachi and Pappachi belong to this period. The time period of the second generation is the 1940s: characters involved here are Ammu and Chacko. Finally, Ramraj adds that the characters Rahel and Estha belong to the third generation, which dates from the 1960s Furthermore, the women from these generations are oppressed by male-dominated society in different ways. Though the oppression changes from generation to generation, being very hard in the first two generations, it is reduced in the last generation.

(151-160)

Thus, within a single novel Roy not only covers the uneven man-woman relationship, but also the dominant social, economic, political and cultural factors and their direct and adverse effect on women and lower caste people. The novel gives a brief account of the life of Reverend John Ipe and his wife Aleyooty Ammachi, parents of Pappachi and Baby Kochamma.

Unlike the women protagonists depicted by Anita Desai, who try to find ‘self ‘within the periphery of their house, Roy’s woman character Mammachi, in the first generation itself stepped out and proved herself to be the best business woman among her male competitors. The woman of the second generation is seen to protest against the social taboos within the family and society like the gender, caste and class discrimination. The women belonging to

the third generation move ahead by standing equivalent to men, even surpassing them on certain issues. From the study of the three generations of women, we can atleast conclude, that the women in Roy's novel are bold and have a rebellious spirit which they try to expose in their own way. Even if the first and second generations of women are subjected to physical abuse, they have refused to submit themselves entirely to the male domination. Women protagonists of Desai's novels portray women belonging to the upper middle class family, educated and well settled in their life, with no struggle for home and food. In a way their condition seems to be far better than the women in Roy's novels, who from their birth to death have oppression by men surrounding them.

Inspite of all the movements that have taken place towards the liberation of women, their positioning still remains second to men. We find this described in the writings of both the authors, Desai and Roy. Both the novelists bring forth the inferior state of women in all their relationship with men. A woman as a mother is expected to be meek, docile, trusting, faithful and forgiving. A son on the other hand becomes over possessive and over demanding for his mother. Nirode in *Voices in the City* becomes over-possessive after the death of his father and hates his mother who makes an audacious attempt by associating herself with Major Chaddha. On the other hand, Chacko in *The God of Small Things* becomes over-demanding after sensing his mother's weakness for him. Not only does he demands money from her, but also her status and power which she earns after bearing the torturous treatment at the hands of her husband. Father –daughter relationship in the works of Desai and Roy again depicts the domination of father over their daughters, either by love or by force. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* becomes a spoilt child in the company of her doting father who never allows Maya to grow up and become mature enough to face and handle the complexities in her life. Ammu in *The God of Small Things* grows rebellious in the company of her ill-tempered father. Brother –sister relationship appears both as a weakness and strength for

the women protagonists in the novels of Desai as depicted by Nirode-Monisha and Bim-Raja's relationship in *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of the Day* respectively. The same relation whereas appears to be a curse in Roy's novel where Chacko instead of becoming a support for Ammu thwarts her outside the Ayemenem House. Rahel is compelled to lead the life of a spinster for Estha, after going through a failed marriage. Husband –wife relationship as depicted in the works of both Desai and Roy portray the miserable plight of women within their marriages. Desai's women suffer due to their hyper sensitive nature that find no match with the practical world of their husband , whereas Roy's women are doomed to suffer due to the set typical mentality of men in a patriarchal family and society. Desai's women conclude their lives either by compromise or suicide and thereby succumbing to their psychological problems. Roy's women knowingly transgress the social, sexual and economic boundaries and suffer and thereby appear more confident and bold as compared to Desai's women.

My third chapter, "Socio-economic Tradition and Culture in the novels of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy" deals with all the social, economic and cultural factors contributing to the predicament of women in India. Desai's women protagonists are confined to lead their lives by taking care of the social and traditional constraints that places a woman in an inferior position to man. Arranged marriages with lack of freedom to choose their partner, domination of husband and his family, surrendering themselves to the need of the family and society and developing various psychological problems in order to escape their meaningless existence, find place in the novels of Anita Desai. Her heroines like Maya, Monisha, Nanda Kaul, Sita and Sarla all have the same story and all suffer from one or the another psychological disorder. Women represented by Roy in *The God of Small Things* are pressurized to accept their subordination by subjecting them to bear various physical and mental tortures. Women and weak in the novel are denied the exercise social, political and cultural rights enjoyed by men belonging to the upper level of society. Poor women are

sexually exploited by the land and factory owners. Gender –discrimination plays a vital role in subjugating women in every possible way. Worthless men like, Chacko are facilitated and let free to enjoy every right that have been denied to the women. Roy in the novel has also depicted the ruthless and brutal behaviour meted out to the Untouchables (Paravans) at the hands of the Police, the Politicians and the touchable workers of Mammachi's Pickle factory. Roy's women show mute acceptance of the humiliation and beatings by men as the cost of enjoying a little freedom. Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu and Rahel all strive to assert freedom under the male domination. Each of the women characters in Roy's novel try to transgress the social, economic and cultural boundaries and are eventually punished which they accept as a reward.

Arundhati Roy, a leading political voice of our country has tried to highlight in her single novel about almost all the big and small causes and their harmful and disastrous effect on the life of women and the weak.

In comparison to Desai's novels, Roy's novel stands high in presenting the multidimensional causes of women predicament. R. K. Dhawan explicitly remarks on Roy's Indian style of depicting the problems more realistically as, 'A writer whose novel is authentically Indian as is her writing style. She is one who has put India on the map of the English-Speaking world. Roy is the novelist extraordinary...Her victory for a first time novelist is the culmination of a fairy tale.'(11) Roy's novel depicts the new woman, stepping out of home to realize the real face of society and her struggle to assert her freedom.

In my fourth chapter, "Search for Identity in the Novels of Arundhati Roy and Anita Desai", both the novelist have presented their women characters striving to come out of their stereotyped role of an ideal mother, daughter and wife. Women who have been accorded a demeaning position in society depict three phases of Feminism – the Feminine, the Feminist and the Female as propounded by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own*. Women in

Desai's novels belong to the Feminine phase, who can sense their subordinate position and try to overcome it but do not protest or cross the limitation set by the male dominated society. Maya, Monisha, Sarah, Nanda Kaul, Sita, Bim and Sarla never show a path-breaking attitude.

Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* has depicted all the three phases of Feminism being experienced and exhibited by women belonging to three different generations. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma appear to be the silent sufferers and accepted their limitation under Patriarchy. Ammu represents the Feminist phase of Feminism by her attempts to equalize her position with Chacko. Her marriage outside the community and eventual divorce also define her rebellious attitude. She raises the bar of social defiance by forming a sexual relationship with a lower caste untouchable man. This may be seen as a parallel to Chacko's behaviour who forms similar relationships with the lower caste women from the factory. In a way, Ammu protests against the gender and class discrimination which aims to control and suppress women. She however, being dependent on her parents and also for the sake of her twins surrenders her life before the complex social, cultural and familial structure. Ammu's daughter, Rahel represents the Female phase of Feminism which believe in the self- discovery of women by visualizing their life through their own eyes. Rahel in the novel appears to be a bold woman who anyhow manages to continue her studies after a lot of controversies, marries just for a change without any passion for it, returns uninvited to Ayemenem and develops incestuous relationship with her brother without having any fear of religion, family, society and even her own self.

My fifth chapter entitled, "A Spectrum of the Variations in Style in the Works of Arundhati Roy and Anita Desai" deals with the various style and technique employed by Desai and Roy in their works that have added the richness of their work apart from the narration and characterization in their works. About Anita Desai, it can be said without any hesitation that she is able to narrate the story, portray the characters, convey the mood, to

evoke the atmosphere, probe into the psyche of her characters successfully. For this Anita Desai uses flash back technique, stream of consciousness technique, effective use of symbolism and language, either to make an atmosphere or transcribe the pronunciation of characters. To create realistic effect, she also uses slang words, but in moderation. The only thing that irritates us is use of songs and poetry in her novels without English paraphrase. Taken as a whole, Anita Desai has succeeded in endearing herself to the reader by using fictional technique as per the requirement of the story.

In this connection, Arundhati Roy's contribution to style and technique in literature is undoubtedly striking and commendable. Her novel, *The God of Small Things* is replete with vivid descriptions of every events figuring in the novel. What strikes the reader more than anything else is her unique way of narrating the story and presenting her characters. The novel remarkably accommodates its sublime deeper thoughts through the fanciful fiction. Have there been no dreaming and redreaming, a part of fictional technique, the tragic tale of love between Ammu and Velutha might have appeared merely the sinful act of flesh trafficking and can signify nothing, particularly in the literary sense.

In all my chapters I have come to learn that both the novelists have a deep concern about the pathetic condition of women in India. Both the novelists lay stress on the preserving of the values in the family and society, but at the same time find it one-sided, which favours men by all means. If Desai wants the human beings to concentrate on the psychological insight, Roy lays stress on the corruption prevalent in and outside the family that kills the feminine sensibility of women. Desai's women protagonists look hopeful for a change to come automatically, whereas Roy's women know that they have to carve their own place.

Roy and Desai, both Postcolonial writers have tried to show that inspite of political freedom, our women still have a long way to go to find psychological and social freedom and find liberation in the true sense of the word.

Findings of My Research Work:

- While Roy's single novel covers nearly eighty years including three generations in its time span Desai's novels are confined to a limited period and to a limited domain. The expanse of time span has allowed Roy to show a larger range of women's suffering and her efforts towards gaining freedom whereas Desai's women have remained limited in their behaviour.
- In Desai's novels the suffering of the women is mostly psychological. They are either neurotic or have some psychosomatic disorder. Roy has not dealt with the psychological suffering as much as with the social issues. Her characters retain their strength and fight the system rather than falling back to depression and suicides.
- None of the women characters of Desai or Roy are seen to be suffering due to financial constraints. Their sufferings emerge out of interpersonal and social constraints, from their inability to be as 'free' as they would like to be.
- After reading both the novelists Roy and Desai, a sense of hopelessness envelops the reader. The authors have not shown hope towards the predicament of women in Indian society. Be it Roy's Ammu or Desai's Sita, they have to return 'home' as their effort to create a position of their own outside fails. Neither of the writers have portrayed a liberated and happy Indian woman who is able to exercise her freedoms and choices.
- In the balance of androgyny Desai's women characters fail to explore the strength within themselves (as Jung would like to call it the 'Man' within themself) whereas Roy has tried to make a representation of this balance symbolically through the relationship of the twins.
- Desai's women characters continue to think and act in opposition to men. They are either dependent on them (seeking emotional nurturance) or are struggling to be

completely independent like them. In either case their focal point continues to be the Man in their lives. Hence they are never free from expectations. The absolute freedom of a woman comes with her reaching a stage where she finds a balance of androgyny within herself, finding a balance of a man and a woman within her own self and stops searching for it outside. It is like finding the balance of the Yin and Yang the Anima and the Animus within self.

Desai and Roy together, depict the pan Indian picture of the predicament of women and it makes a greater sense to study them not in opposition to each other, but as the diversity that exists in a large country like India.

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