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Subaltern Themes in the Novels of Anita Desai

Abstract

Anita Desai is a world renowned author and she has written many feminist novels. In many of her novels the theme of subaltern exists. In this paper the focus is on the subaltern themes in the novels of Anita Desai. The simple definition of Subaltern is that it is designated to the socially, politically, and geographically outside people. Subalterns are those people who are outside the hegemonic power structure. Like most of the novels by Desai, all the characters are subaltern. For instance, In *Fire in the Mountain*, the main protagonist is marginalized. These small incidents shows how subaltern themes are sprinkled in all her novels.

The term subaltern designates the populations which are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland. In describing "history told from below", subaltern was coined by Antonio Gramsci, notably through his work on cultural hegemony, which identified the groups that are excluded from a society's established institutions and thus denied the means by which people have a voice in their society.

The terms subaltern and Subaltern Studies entered postcolonial studies through the works of the Subaltern Studies Group, a collection of historians of the Indian Subcontinent who explored the political-actor role of the men and women who constitute the mass population, rather than the political roles of the social and economic elites, in the history of the Indian Subcontinent. Marxist historians had already been investigating colonial history as told from the perspective of the proletariat, using the concept of social classes as being determined by economic relations. In the 1970s, subaltern began to denote the colonized peoples of the Indian subcontinent and described a new perspective of the history of an imperial colony as told from the point of view of the colonized rather than that of the colonizers. In the 1980s, the scope of enquiry of Subaltern Studies was applied as an "intervention in South Asian historiography".

The fiction of Anita Desai adds a new dimension to Indo English Writing. Turning inward her fiction grapples with the intangible realities of life, plunges into the innermost depths of the human psyche to fathom its mysteries, the inner turmoil, the chaos inside the mind. Under the impact of the new pressures of the scientific and technological advancement, the world around us shows signs of the disintegration of the individual. It is therefore imperative that the modern Indo-English novel should seek new techniques to articulate these newly experienced inner and outer realities.

Anita Desai's preoccupation with the individual highlighting the psychological motivations, frustrations, sense of failure, and his keen awareness of the futility of existence radiates from each of her novels. She may be said to be the spokesman for our culture. She transmutes authentically its uncertainties, its complexities, its paradoxes. Her imagination is horrified by the emptiness of modern life as is Saul Bellow's or Ionesco's.

Desai shows all through his novel that personalities will remain subaltern as long as they are detained inside a homogenous story. The occasion, this nearness of various stories, is recognized in the content, the detained characters or 'subalterns' make their mark.

The problem of marital discord, the tension between husband and wife because of their temperamental incompatibility is yet another oft repeated theme in Anita Desai's novels. The theme of marital dissonance, handled so effectively in *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* through the married lives of Maya-Gautama, and Monisha-Jiban has been re-enacted in this novel through Sita-Raman. In all these three novels the novelist's prime aim has consistently been the projection of the existential predicament of woman as an individual. In each of these novels one could sense the author's urge for a way of living which would respond to the innermost yearnings of the Indian woman for self-emancipation and self-dignity. Sita, the wife of an upper middle class factory owner in Bombay, has had four children "With pride, with pleasure— sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure—with all the placid serenity that supposedly goes with pregnancy and parturition" (p. 20). "Now in her forties, greying, aging (p. 20), Sita finds in her fifth pregnancy the impetus to revolt against her milieu, the indifference of her family, and the cruel violence that she sees in the human and non-human world around her.

She does not want the fifth child nor is she prepared for an abortion. She just wants "to keep it, she does not want "it to be born" (p. 23). That is why abandoning Bombay under terror, leaving Raman in despair, she comes "on a pilgrimage" to Manori island in a mood of

doubt and desperation to "beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn" (p. 20). Sita's wish may sound ludicrous and mad, but through this mad craze she does succeed in asserting her individual identity. Sita's flight from the experience of the "civilized world" to the pristine island of miracles originates from the fright of creation which could be explained as "an immaculate conception in reverse" (p. 20), a case of regression and retreat from reality in Freudian psychology. She does not want anything to happen. It is just unthinkable for her "that anything should happen— for happenings were always violent" (p. 37).

The most remarkable characteristic of the novel is the skillful employment of the stream of consciousness technique, the revelation of the character's inner working of mind through interior monologues and the dramatizing of feelings. In this novel, as in her earlier ones and also *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Anita Desai does not portray characters in a traditional manner. The characters come alive in their dynamic process, always growing and changing, viable and mutable. They are portrayed as preoccupied with the present, look backward in time and visualize future as well. They have been represented in retrospect and fall back upon memory, or the uncontrolled flow of thought. With this use of pure memory and flux, Anita Desai may be said to be depicting reality. Another striking similarity, as regards her art of characterization in all of her novels, is that she is interested in depicting the characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made a stand against, the general current. "It is easy," as she herself makes it clear, "to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out the great No, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them."¹⁰ Lest she should be mistaken for being a propounder of any theory, she hastens to stress that she does not set out, while writing a novel, "to illustrate this theme." She is not trying to

propound a theory, or to edify or improve her readers. She writes because she is primarily "a writer and must write—that is all."

Where shall We Go This Summer? adds a new dimension to the Indo-English novel for the fact that it deals with essential human condition—"the terror of facing, single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence." The novels of Anita Desai and her characters surely resemble the subaltern. They are the voice of suffering, not in the physical sense, but the inner psyche.

Reference

Ho, Elaine Yee Lin. *Anita Desai*. Atlantic Publishing, 2010.