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Dr. Suporna Mitra
Assistant Professor,
Department of English, DBNP
Arts SSGG Commerce and
SSAM Science College,
Lonavala, Maharashtra, India

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Suporna Mitra
Assistant Professor,
Department of English, DBNP
Arts SSGG Commerce and
SSAM Science College,
Lonavala, Maharashtra, India

A feminist study of Anita Desai's diamond dust and other stories

Dr. Suporna Mitra

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Abstract

One of the most distinct features of the post-independence period is the emergence of short fiction as a distinct literary form. Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee etc. enriched the Indian English short stories. Most of them have taken this form secretly and tried to focus on familial relationships, women in transition and other feminist issues.

Anita Desai who came into prominence with her first novel, *Cry, The Peacock* and consolidated her position as a novelist in subsequent novels also tried to present lyric awareness of her thematic choices. Her first collection of stories *Games at Twilight and Other Stories* is a collection of studies of relationships familial, psychological and man-woman relationship. Her second collection of short stories entitled *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* is different in thematic focus because it has diasporic and feminist issues.

Keywords: Gender, feminism, exploitation, subjugation

Introduction

One of the most distinct features of the post-independence period is the emergence of short fiction as a distinct literary form. Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee etc. enriched the Indian English short stories. Most of them have taken this form secretly and tried to focus on familial relationships, women in transition and other feminist issues. Anita Desai who came into prominence with her first novel, *Cry, The Peacock* and consolidated her position as a novelist in subsequent novels also tried to present lyric awareness of her thematic choices. Her first collection of stories *Games at Twilight and Other Stories* is a collection of studies of relationships familial, psychological and man-woman relationship. Her second collection of short stories entitled *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* is different in thematic focus because it has diasporic and feminist issues. The objective of this paper is to examine feminist themes in the selected stories that have female protagonists. The stories will be studied using analytical method.

Literature Review

Sharmila Jajodiya in her work "Existential Crisis in Anita Desai's Fiction; A Post-Colonial Perspective" discusses the changing aspects of the existential crises in post-colonial India in the 20th and 21st century due to rapid transformation, globalization and increasing human awareness in life.

Dr. G. Nirmala in her work studies use of irony in the short stories of *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* discusses how Anita Desai presents three types of irony: dramatis irony, verbal irony and situational irony in her short stories in a successful way.

The first story *Royalty* explores the female psychology of sibling jealousy and the male psychology of manipulating this jealousy for the benefit of the male. The central character, Sarla, is shown wavering between an intense desire to exercise her freedom, and her sense of social responsibility as a hostess. Overwhelmed by the heat of Delhi Sarla and her husband plans a holiday trip to a hill station When they are about to set out, they receive a letter from Raja, their family friend in Oxford and a poet of considerable repute in California, that he plans to visit Delhi and intends to stay with them. He expects that" she would be there, wouldn't she? You won't desert me?" (*Royalty* 2) Sarla is excited though this meant that she will have to put her plans to hold.

She will have to unpack her luggage and put her house in proper order. Moreover, her servants who were looking forward to a holiday, would be disappointed. Soon after Raja's arrival a game ensues between Sarla and her sister, Maya of competing with each other to draw the attention of Raja to herself. Sarla is disappointed to see that Raja prefers Maya's company to her own. We find Raja taking full advantage of the situation. He asks Sarla and Ravi to arrange a party so that he could listen to a recital by Mrs. Ila Dutta Ray. Sarla detests Ila Dutta but she cannot refuse Raja's request. Later, he expresses a desire to join Sarla and Ravi on their trip to mountains and requests them to postpone their trip by a week so that he could be present at a lecture delivered by a person whom he wanted to expose. The trip is postponed which displeases the cook who immediately leaves for his village and Sarla is left behind to manage everything on her own. The next day Raja announces that he has changed his plan and now he is leaving with Ila Dutta Ray to Kashmir. Sarla is surprised and upset. She realizes that she has passed that age when she could engage the attention of males.

Sarla's world revolves around her husband Ravi. They are now married for thirty years and in these years, they have developed an understanding of each other. Anita Desai has portrayed Sarla's character in an interesting way. Sarla admires Raja and she is filled with a sense of importance when she comes to know that Raja has chosen her to be his hostess. Her hidden social ego forces her to agree to each of Raja's demand no matter how unreasonable they are at sometimes. Her perceptions are of great importance for the story as they alternate between a sense of social obligation as the hostess of a famous poet and that of the frustration at being used as a pawn by Raja. She is overwhelmed at times by Raja's poetic talent and his innate ability to transform the humdrum and commonplace into something beautiful and enchanting that can make others see a familiar place from an entirely different perspective "as they never saw it themselves as a place of magic, enchantment of pleasure so immense and rich that it could never be exhausted" (Royalty 19)

Raja uses his closeness with Sarla to his advantage. He manipulates her for his own benefit. When he informs her of his plan to visit them in Delhi, he writes that he will find her there. He expects Sarla to drive him to "the silver market in Chandni Chowk" (Royalty 12) where he wishes to select an exquisitely crafted piece to take back with him to California. Later in the story when Sarla insists that the heat is unbearable, he suggests that she needs "a walk in the sublime Lodhi Gardens when the sun is setting and Venus appears in the sky so silently." (Royalty 18) He does not disclose the fact that he has already arranged a meeting there with three of his women admirers, including Sarla's sister Maya.

Sarla's inability to understand Raja's exploitative nature enables the latter to dominate her and ignore her opinions. He persuades Sarla to arrange a party and a song recital by Ila Dutta Ray though Sarla is not enthusiastic about it. "But Raja would not hear of a refusal, or accept any excuse." (Royalty 51) The party later becomes the root cause of misunderstanding between Sarla and Maya.

Anita Desai has ironically portrayed each of the three principal characters, Sarla, Raja and Ravi. She satirizes Sarla for her reluctance to pay the price for the social prestige she enjoys because she is Raja's hostess. Desai

through the characters of Raja, implies that most poets are very selfish, demanding and calculating. He enjoys flattery and this desire finds fulfilment in Sarla's house. Raja is an egoist who loves himself. His pretensions are not revealed in the beginning of the story but gradually the reader is made to see through his deception. Ravi is shown as being unable to resolve the situation in which his wife and he are trapped. This reflects his weakness.

Anita Desai through Raja's character shows the insensitivity of men to the traditional female responsibility of managing the household and the amount of hard work involved in performing domestic chores.

In "Winter scape" another story in *Diamond Dust and Other Stories*, the issue of women's struggle in male dominated society is portrayed through different stages in the lives of two principal characters Asha and Anu, the two sisters. In the Indian society where a male child is preferred by most couples, Anu, the younger sister, suffers the most as her birth had belied, for the second time, her parent's expectation of having a son. Asha is a confident and vivacious child but Anu's personality is repressed because of the social censure she has to endure. She develops into a shy and nervous girl. She is introvert and dependent on Asha for trifles.

Anu is intelligent but her academic career is cut short after Asha's marriage, for she is expected to stay at home and help her mother in household chores. "Later, sons are born to their parents and the pressure, the tension "between the parents and daughter was relieved. (Winterscape 28) The story of the bonding between the two sisters is given in retrospect. They are represented as having great strength of character, though both of them are widows and living in a village in Punjab. Asha is married to a jovial, wealthy farmer. Unfortunately, she is unable to have a child. Anu, on the other hand, is married to a clerk and gives birth to a boy soon after her marriage. Asha and Anu are alter egos; they are emotionally dependent on each other and always come to each other's aid in moments of distress. When Asha becomes embittered because of series of miscarriages and still births, Anu lets Asha take the responsibility of looking after the child and Anu feels grateful to her for this. Asha and her husband are delighted to have child." He was the child of their dreams, their thwarted hopes and desires." (Winterscape 31)

When Asha's husband dies in an accident on Rakesh's first birthday, Anu decides to give away the child to Asha. Anu explains to her husband that her sister needed their child. As far as they are concerned, they can have more sons. "Asha needs him. We can have more sons for ourselves." (Winterscape 33) She does this to make Asha happy, even at the cost of her own marital happiness on account of her emotional dependence on her sister. Asha spends much of her money on Rakesh's education and later sends him to Canada for further studies. The child acts as the bond that hold the two sisters together. When Rakesh grows up, he moves to Canada to take up a job. Later, he marries a Canadian girl, Beth and sends a photocopy of the marriage certificate to his two mothers. We can sense the disappointment of Asha and Anu on receiving this news but when they are informed of Beth's pregnancy, Anu writes to Rakesh expressing her desire to visit Canada and see the grandchild "with an unaccustomed boldness their intention to travel to Canada and see their grandchild for themselves." (Winterscape 39) Though the two sisters have sacrificed

much for the sake of Rakesh, we see that their hopes are shattered when they visit him in Canada. After living ten years away from his mothers and country, Rakesh has become distant from them and finds it difficult to relate to his two mothers. Probably, this is the reason why he did not consider it necessary to inform them about his plan to marry Beth. He does not realize that he has hurt them deeply by not inviting them to his wedding. While their lives continue to revolve around him, he is only concerned about his nuclear family. He now finds it difficult even to relate to his two mothers and to their stories of the people in their village in India. He “would give an embarrassed laugh, glance at Beth in appeal, and find reason to stay late at work” (Winterscape 44) In spite of having reservations, Beth and her mother Dorris, take due care of Anu and Asha. It is Beth who makes tea for them while Rakesh is shown cracking his knuckles. Beth is perplexed to learn that Rakesh has two mothers and that his biological mother, Anu had given him away as a child to his sister, Asha out of love for her. She finds it difficult to appreciate Anu’s sacrifice for the sake of her sister’s happiness. She has a sister, Susan, who lives with her unemployed husband and a string of children in a trailer in Manitoba. She can never dream of giving away her yet unborn child to her sister or even sharing it with her. Beth cannot understand how Rakesh’s real mother could have been contented to be called Masi or Aunt by Rakesh and why she never attempted to take him back. She discusses the issue with his mother but they cannot comprehend how there can be such perfect understanding between sisters.

Though Rakesh still loves his mothers, there is total lack of communication between them. He is not able to talk to them freely and they feel unhappy and depressed, alienated and unwanted. Throughout their lives Asha and Anu kept silent as they faced the vicissitudes of life without any protest against the gender discrimination prevalent in their society. Social silence is an important component of the traditional female identity as dictated by patriarchy. Society prefers women to be silent. In Desai’s story the lives of Asha and Anu are built upon such social silence. In this context what Simone de Beauvoir stated in her *Second Sex* is relevant:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, Psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature intermediate between male and eunuch which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir 445)

In the story “*The Rooftop Dwellers*” two women- Tara and Moyna- are shown as ambitious, hard-working and sincere intellectuals who want to do their utmost to succeed in their careers and carve out a niche for themselves. They represent modern women who are desirous of living independently. They leave their small towns to live independently in metropolitan city forsaking the comforts of their parent’s homes and pulling up with the inconveniences of working women’s hostels which impose several restrictions upon them.

The story focuses on Moyna, a young girl, who is working in Delhi. She had earlier adapted to the restriction of a working women’s hostel. In the beginning, she felt like a prisoner “she felt she was trapped in a cell wherever she shuts the door, she was swallowed by the cell, its prisoner.” (The Rooftop Dwellers 160) Her love for kitten results in being served an eviction notice by the warden, and she has

to shift and settle in Barsati, a roof-top dwelling. Though Moyna finds unexpected freedom and happiness living alone in the Barsati, she at the same time becomes conscious of the fact that she is observed as a female body by the males around her. The other roof-top dwellers and even her landlord’s servant begin to sing movie songs on seeing her. She learns to ignore the piercing patriarchal glances of these men. Moyna is viewed with suspicion by the Bhallas, her landlord, who cannot accept the fact that she has both men and women as friends. Living alone Moyna makes new acquaintances and friendship and discovers in herself hidden abilities and unexplained dimensions. She is capable to handle problems of her life like the theft of her precious belongings and her long illness. At her work place she is happy with her position of assistant to Tara, the editor of a literary journal *Books*.

Tara is married to Ritwick Misra, a lecturer in the university. He is an open-minded person and therefore, Tara is able to pursue her career in spite of looking after a small boy. Her husband is instrumental in getting her the job of the chief editor of a literary magazine through her friend, Bose Saheb. Mr. Bose had started the magazine in Delhi as he missed the literary- intellectual environment of Calcutta. The magazine mainly containing book- reviews is contributed to by well-known writers and poems by upcoming poets. Though libraries have become subscribers it is not an easy task to persuade individuals to subscribe to the magazine. Tara and Moyna, besides their editing and publishing work, are also required to promote the magazine which is a difficult task as Delhi does not have a culture of literature.

There are many things in the story that make us aware of gender discrimination. The office of the magazine is not all-female world. Raj Kumar, a peon, in the office, does only small office jobs, but his male ego is hurt when Tara becomes worried about the poor circulation of the magazine and he remarks:” What is going on... I am here running everything for you. Why do you need Bose Saheb?” (The Rooftop Dwellers 187) Mohan the second male, employed Bose Saheb to push up the circulation of the magazine, comes to the rescue of Tara and Moyna in a crisscross situation. The incident underscores the fact that in a male-dominated society, howsoever hard a woman may try, she cannot become self- sufficient and self-sustaining. A crisis occurs on account of an angry outburst by Awasthi, a writer of Hindi short stories, whose collection of stories had been unfavorably reviewed by Karan a free- lance reviewer. Tara tries hard to pacify him but Awasthi’s anger goes on rising: Why have I been insulted? I am a member of the Sahitya Academy

I am the author of four volumes of short stories, one of autobiography,

Seven books of travel and also of essays... My name is known in all

Hindi speaking areas. (The Rooftop Dwellers 197)

Mohan intervenes at this stage, snatches the journal that Awasthi had been waving aggressively from his hands tossing it on the desk and contemptuously says that” the editor is not responsible for reviewer’s view” (The Rooftop Dwellers 197) and then catching Awasthi by the elbow, leads him out of the office. The incident shows Anita Desai’s intention of highlighting the superior and protective role played by males in a world in which women find themselves vulnerable and helpless. She suggests that it is

the society that makes a woman dependent on male support to sustain and survive.

Betty Friedan believed that women had been conspiratorially hemmed in the role of wives and mothers by a calculating patriarchy. She declared in her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, that “for women, as for man the need for self-fulfillment-autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization- is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences, when it is thwarted” (Friedan 226) What happens to the two women in the story who were assembling to seek identities of their own and self-actualization is that they retreat into the area of the feminine mystique which reserves for them traditional roles. The failure of the magazine is their personal failures. It is significant that Tara, who is bold, modern, authoritative woman ultimately gets lost in domesticity. Equally significant is the joyous response of Moyna who receives a letter which informs her that they have found a suitable match for her with a good job and prospects. Her mind is made up and she is happy.

Conclusion

Like her novels, Anita Desai's short stories focus on women of different ages, and strata of society engaged in their struggle to either consciously overcome the restrictions imposed upon their sex by society, or to adhere to culturally approved behaviour at the cost of their characters are shown to be experiencing a perpetual dilemma between personal freedom and social norms for feminine demeanor.

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