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**WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL OF
SHASHI DESHPANDE, ANITA DESAI AND RAMA
MEHTA: A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY**

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Women Characters in the Novel of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Rama Mehta: A Psychological Study

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Abstract – The purpose of this paper is to examine the emergence of the feminine sensibility as a concept of reality in the fictional world of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Rama Mehta. She is one of the most recognized figures in Indo- Anglian fiction. The present work attempts to analyse the psychological study in the novels of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Rama Mehta. I have chosen Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Rama Mehta for my research work because she has laid emphasis not only women character's but on men also.

To conclude I can say that the feeling of sensitivity, thought, intelligence has attracted most extensive critical attention in India and abroad. She uses her power sensibilities to observe a life and combines the same with her artistic vision to create memorable characters.

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INTRODUCTION

Woman has been portrayed in myriad roles - as a mother and protector, woman as inspirer and cherisher, woman as the motivating primal force-shakti protecting good and destroying evil, woman has been envisioned as a chaste, suffering wife, and also as charmer or lurer. These are some of the facets familiar in literature. The image of woman in Indo-Anglian novel is complex and multifaceted. Generally, She is presented as the heroine of the novel. Indo-Anglian fiction reflects how a girl is unwelcomed in the family and explores the reasons behind the traditional view. The same exploration is presented in the fiction of 'Big Three'—Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, who turned their attention to the realistic problems of the poor as well as the treatment of woman. Later on, the woman writers, like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, etc., explored the area of women's cause and put forth their writings from the feministic point of view.

Today's contemporary Indian English novelists are writing for the masses using the theme of feminism, which not only interests the readers but also affects them. Through the world, feminism has generated interest amongst the people and India is no exception. Feminism is thoroughly accomplished through the work of the Indian English Novelists.

Feminism does not particularly talk of equality and rights of a woman but it is more about compassion,

respect and understanding from the male counterparts. The main cause for the dissatisfaction of the women in today's society is the superior attitude of the men. Throughout, the women have suffered in silence and feminism talks exactly about that. Women have affirmed their fundamental rights and have realized where they exactly went wrong. Indian English Novelists have frankly highlighted this concept. Authors like Anita Desai,

Shashi Deshpande have actually used the various aspects of the male dominated society as their main theme. However, the concept of feminism is handled in restricted conditions by the authors. Today, Indian societies have broadly accepted Feminism keeping aside the patriarchal predomination to an extent.

In the galaxy of Indian novelists in English, Indian women writers too shine luminously like their male counterparts by their significant contribution to enrichment of Indian English novels. Though women writers attempted their hands at this new genre as early as 1879. Indian women novelists in English constitute a significant group. Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. It provides insights, a wealth of understanding, a reservoir of meanings and a basis of discussion. In Indian novelists in English, women writers like R. P. Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rama

Mehta, Manju Kapur and Geeta Mehta have heralded new consciousness, particularly the pathetic plight of the Indian women. Through women writer's eyes, we can see a different world, with their assistance we can seek to realize the potential of human achievement. Though a Western art form has been applied to an Indian mode of storytelling in the Indo-English fiction, the content of it seems to be Indian revealing the Indian sensibility and the Indian social and political situations.

The early Indian English novels, written mostly by male novelists, undoubtedly, reflected the male side of brain, documenting their own successes, frustrations and problems; while women were relegated to a secondary position. At the centre of their novels was the male experience that largely determined their themes and choice of characters. In their scheme of things, women are but appendages to their male counterparts, and are meant to be passive.

The theme, in question, is beyond all doubts, associated with or throws into bold relief, questions of woman's identity, her selfhood, and the choices she makes when caught in the whirlpool of complex man-woman relationship. Image of woman in Indo-Anglian fiction has undergone a tremendous change during last four decades. Writers, woman writers in particular, have moved away from traditional portrayal of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards conflict-torn female characters searching for identity.

Recent novelists, such as, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Bharati Mukherjee, Rama Mehta etc, depict both, the 'diversity of women', and the 'diversity within each woman'. These novelists have launched 'a voyage within' to explore the consciousness of their women characters. As such, it calls to know how women characters, in Indo-Anglian novels, cope with changes in their life, and with the rival pulls of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in their search for identity, independence, fulfillment and love within marriage or outside it. It does not seem out of context to mention here that the old concept of tradition and modernity as 'antithetical', and that if one wished to be modern, one must discard all traditions; or alternatively, one must resist modernity and remain rooted in tradition, no longer holds the ground. Rather, it is being increasingly recognized that tradition and modernity need not be dichotomous. The word "and" between the two key words, therefore, need not always mean "versus", but also "plus."

THEMES IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

Anita Desai is one of those few Indian novelists in English who have tried to understand closely the predicament of their female characters. She herself contributes psychic novels, which she narrates as "purely subjective." She rightly analyses her psychological feelings in the following:

"It has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of such novels, thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends upon observation rather than a private vision."

Her forte is the quest of sensibility and her writing expose inner realities and psychic echoes of her characters. The most recurrent themes in all her novels are "the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism"² of her characters. She is interested in peculiar and eccentric characters rather than every day, average ones. She presents the plight of introspective, hypersensitive women in her novels. Her each work as an accelerating exploration of the psychics self.

Mrs. Desai discovers its principles suitable to her themes. "Aspects of Existentialism" are in evidence in the total framework of her stories. It lays stress on the alienation of man from an absurd world, his following estrangement from normal society, and his recognition of the world as negative and meaningless ³/₄ presents the sensitive, individual, fragmented and spirituality destroyed by the particular social conditions of life, a life complex enough to make him obsessed. This particular aspect of Existentialism ³/₄ the one alone, the man has no record, this kind of characters are appears to be a favorite subject of Desai.

The fictional world of Anita Desai is located in the corridor of human consciousness. She is almost obsessively concerned with the dark, uncannily oppressive inner world of her intensely introvert characters on the merge of psychological breakdown. They are alienated from the world, the society and the family around them because they fail to meet the challenges of life. Their inability to face life forces them to regress to their childhood world of fantasy.

Modern women identify with the heroines because they find themselves in a similar situation, facing the same problem of identity, loss of values and meaninglessness in life. Anita Desai seriously examines, with the consciousness of woman, the effect of the accepted social norms in the life and position of a woman, who is considered merely a drawing-room decoration piece or domesticated animal. The search for understanding and sympathy with the woman, whose life without the support of man means losing safety, happiness, comfort and dignity. And that is the central point in Anita Desai's fictional world.

Anita Desai projects a moving picture of the life of yet another depressed, married woman, Monisha, the sister of Nirode in *Voices in the City*, (1965). Like Maya, Monisha also suffers from feelings of emptiness within as well as without, but unlike Maya, she has learned to suppress her emotions. Maya pushes Gautama off the roof so as to protect her world of

sensuous abundance but Monisha sets herself afire to reach the core of intense feeling. She is married against her wishes in a middle class family so grossly unsuited to that her sister, Anita finds herself wondering if fathers were so callous that they were indifferent to their daughter's feelings. This unsuitable alliance is evocative of the stifling atmosphere in which Monisha lives for neither her husband nor her in-laws try to sympathize with her. Monisha's arrival to Calcutta reveals the pangs of her unfulfilled motherhood. She sees her big house shrunken drawn together like a boil about to burst, symbolic of hollowness and callousness of human relationships. Her relationship with her husband is characterized only by loneliness and lack of communication. Monisha finds her life a virtual imprisonment. She is always haunted by a feeling that her life is totally meaningless.

Anita Desai has been a prolific writer and several articles have been written on her novels. All those books that are available will be reviewed and studied in detail. Anita Desai is an eminent contemporary Indian English woman writer of fiction. She has written on a variety of themes but a majority of them are based on women's sufferings. Anita Desai has a unique inner approach to women psyche which she explores with careful sensitivity that shows her deep understanding of women's problem in India. This study concentrates on the pivotal roles of female characters in her novels and their status in the intricate realm of her fiction writing. The study has contemporary relevance because it deals with issues that are representatives of contemporary reality. It is with this intention of honest social and psychological research of contemporary fiction that this study will be carried out. Indian English literature originated as a necessary outcome of the introduction of English education in India under colonial rule. In recent years, it has attracted widespread interest, both in India and abroad. It is now recognized that Indian English literature is not only part of Commonwealth literature, but also occupies a "great significance in the World literature.

WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE EARL NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

Shashi Deshpande has written eight novels and four collections of short stories. This paper deals with her earlier novels and studies women's issues in these novels.

Trapped between tradition and modernity, we find her women protagonists undergoing great mental trauma in their quest for identity before they affirm themselves in these novels.

Roots and Shadows, her first novel, depicts the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male dominated and tradition-bound society. *The*

Dark Holds No Terrors, her second novel, is all about male ego wherein the male refuses to play a second fiddle role in marriage. *That Long Silence*, her third novel, is about self-doubts and fears which Jaya undergoes till she affirms herself.

ROOTS AND SHADOWS - *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande's first full length novel, is about the struggle of the protagonist Indu who is a representative of the educated middle-class. It describes her assertion of her individuality to achieve freedom leading to her confrontation with her family and the male-dominated society. Feeling smothered in an oppressive male-dominated and tradition-bound society, she attempts to explore her inner self to assert her individuality. It tells about Indu's painful self-analysis. Many other themes form part of the novel like the theme of bohemianism and the sorry state of women.

THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS - *The Dark Hold No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande's second novel, is about Saru — an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife — who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents' house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return. Her relations with her husband become unbearably strained and she returns home for some solace. Here she gets a chance to think over her relationships with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother, Dhruva.

THAT LONG SILENCE - Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian housewife. Many women writers tried their hand at expressing this long silence that had turned women into non-entities. Shashi Deshpande's success lies in her representation of real life experience. She realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya the main woman character of the novel and her quest for the self or identity.

RAMA MEHTA'S INSIDE THE HAVELI

Among a score of excellent women writers of Indo-English fiction, such as Nayantra Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Geta Mukherjee, Namita Gokhale and others, Rama Mehta holds a unique place on account of her deep insight into the lives, life style, pangs and pride, tears, fears and loyalty towards the family and community tradition of the Rajput women of Mewar. They cling to tradition and purdah on one hand and yet compromise with change and modernity on the other. The novel traces the actualization of a Bombay-educated modern woman, Geeta into the Haveli traditions and gradual

compromise with the institutions of purdah, child-marriage and female education. The way Geeta Mehta has minutely described the inside life of the Udaipur havelis, leaves the reader in real sense of awe and revelation.

Rama Mehta's *Inside The Haveli* is both an analysis and synthesis of socio-cultural realities. Geeta, the protagonist, is a woman of sound instinct. Following her marriage, Geeta's journey from Bombay to Udaipur is a journey from open space to a cloistered one. It is the story of her own acculturation and assimilation in a more traditional society. Yet, it is in no way, an obliteration of her self- her womanhood, her selfhood. Rama Mehta's 'journey to freedom,' as presented through Geeta in this novel, is through assimilation, acceptance, persuasion, and not through segregation or separation, nor defiance, nor rejection of values. She is deeply and genuinely concerned with family fortune and respectability, and she will not discard meaningful traditions for modernity-sake.

The dividing line between tradition and modernity is often blurred; and the question gets further complicated on account of the heterogeneity of our society and not really the proportionate growth and development among different regions and sections of it. The whole question is highly complex. An Indian woman's self-perception as also the society's expectations from her have, for long, been determined by a complex of ideas and values and beliefs codified in *Manusmriti* and codified by tradition.

Inside the Haveli, at first glance, depicts a cultural upheaval in Geeta's life who gained momentum through the dominant forces unleashed by the phallogocentric world of the haveli. She breaks the silence of the haveli by the steps taken towards her emancipation in the stringent and traditional customs of the haveli. The haveli has its own set rules for the women and it was a big haveli:

Sangram Singhji's haveli like so many others of the nobility was in a gully. Its first courtyard was built three hundred years ago and there were only three rooms around it. But like a banyan tree once it had taken root it spread. Today the haveli has so many courtyards with so many rooms.

The haveli represents the silence of women in the Rajasthan where this haveli is a symbol of this oppression. The haveli has no violence on the ladies. Though there may be other havelis which are depicted bigger than this haveli, "Sangram Singhji's haveli is the biggest in the gully although it is not the biggest in the old city. The haveli has been described outwardly shapeless but inwardly well-planned that is symbolic of the social boundaries of women under the strict and sturdy rules like stone of the haveli.

Inside the Haveli is a sensitive piece of realistic fiction, even an authentic sociological study, and it is written with a naturalness and poise that are disarming and

effective at once. The evocation of scene, character and especially of atmosphere is almost uncanny... The balance between repose and movement is well sustained, there is romance but no cheap sex, there is tension but no violence, and there is a feeling for the values and verities.

The scene on the global platform is much changed now. Women are now being allowed to take part in education. Unlike the education of men, however, it was never intended to give females full academic education. The aim was to enable them to fulfill their traditional roles better, not to change those roles. These women are not only double marginalized by the colonizers and by Indian men but also by the other societal rules prevalent in that time. Boehmer claims that.

CONCLUSION

Women in India have been subject to discrimination, sexual exploitation, malnutrition and social taboos since the early 19th century. The change in the status of women in India is a slow, steady and continuing process.

In modern India, the position of women has changed considerably. Her position in modern Indian society is equal to that of men, socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally. The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand, she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence.

A foray into the Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Rama Mehta reveals quite a few interesting facts. While Anita Desai is inclined to portray the alienation, the silent psychology suffering of her female characters, Shashi Deshpande focuses her attention upon a family crisis in the life of an educated middle class woman, her ensuing trauma and her respectable re-adjustment in the family and social set up. Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* as well refers to an educated woman's effort to come to terms with the cross-currents of

tradition and modernity. Geeta, the heroine, gradually realizes the value and relevance of the haveli traditions as she matures herself as a responsible custodian of the Jeewan Niwas. Feminism has a whole variety of shades and approaches: Anita Desai's female characters are portrayed either as victims or rebels. Shashi Deshpande and Rama Mehta on the other hand portray women in the context of the Indian tradition where woman demands reasonable freedom and self-respect in the family and social set-up.

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