

Be Your Own Heroine a Comparative Study of Female Lead Protagonists of Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai

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ABSTRACT

Are women of contemporary period suffer from identify crisis, financial dependence, lack of decision making, non recognition of their effort in the world of highly competitive and materialistic populace. A woman plays crucial roles in her life time be it as a daughter, Sister, Wife, Mother or as an individual. Is this world worth crying for? We have tried to find answer to these questions through study made in detail comparing the female protagonist of Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai, renowned novelists of contemporary age.

Keywords: - Women, Contemporary, Populace, Female Protagonist, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai.

I INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya portray the world of Indian married women as they perceive it. Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, these writers do not profess any special affinity for feminist theories nor do they reveal a strong, anti-male stance anywhere. It is true that these novelists are rather concerned with the disturbing question of the existence of women, but they were not misogynists seeking a world without men. These novelists deal with women belonging to both rural and urban, poor and upper classes of the Society. The protagonists depicted in their novels, showed resemblance to each other in some respects. At the same time, their individual characteristics have set them apart from other and contribute to the variety of protagonists that one comes across in these novels.

The novels that are taken up for study are: *Nectar in a sieve*, *Some Inner Furry*, *A Handful of Rice* and *The Silence of Desire* by Kamala Markandaya and *Cry the Peacock*, *Clear Light of the Day*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* and *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai. The study of the selected novels of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya reveal remarkable similarities and differences in their attitudes and vision. They derive their stuff primarily from their inward and outward (subjective and objective) experiences of life. Their themes have a profound socio-cultural and psychological significance. They have succeeded in capturing the transitional phases of the rapidly changing roles of contemporary women in India. The divergences between the two writers emerge only when the individual works are set against the specific psychological and socio-cultural surroundings.

II COMPERATIVE STUDY

Both the writers have captured the socio-cultural changes that have radically affected the lives of women since the fifties. The comparative study of these writers on the Concept of Indian women, as an individual and as a wife sibling and parents as well has shed light on several aspects of Indian Tradition and Culture. A comparative study of their fiction reveal, the fundamental unity of human perception especially that of women's perception. Both the writers depict the real images of women in the Indian Society. The selected three novels of each writer have been explored to analyze the main aspects regarding the life viz. marriage, migration, motherhood and midlife of Indian women as wife. In their fiction women characters are brought to the centre stage and their characters are elaborately explored in bringing out their power. However, there is a notable difference between the two writers with respects to the attitude of their central characters towards life.

Desai's women seem to put individuality above every thing else. Most of them are basically tragic characters and introverts. They fail to cope with their surroundings, their families and society. They are psychologically disturbed, morbid, self-absorbed and incoherent in their manners and expression. The desire to live and love clash so violently in them, that their interpersonal relationships become dissonant and jarring and drive them to withdrawal and alienation. Of course, Desai justifies her selection of solitary and introspective characters. She says:

Well, I think, solitary and introspective people are always very aware of living on the brink. Anyone of us might one day face an experience which may push one over, but perhaps my introspective characters are more aware than other are of what lies on the other side.¹

Desai is primarily concerned with the psychological problems of apprehensive women. Neuroticism is a psychological problem. Anita Desai is highly interested in the presentation of the psychological problems of neurotic women of all the ages. The description of psychological problems becomes the base of her writings. Like Kamala Markandaya she is well aware of social problems that affect the people in their personal life. She believes that these social problems decide human mind and finally human beings become the victims of their problems.

Desai's women remain within their orbits and protested against lack of diversity, injustice and humiliations. This does not mean that Desai's women do not desire for harmonious and peaceful life. They have a desire for a deeper union of minds in marital relationship but they are introverts who refuse to compromise and, they have the inability to accept the perspective of their respective partners which inevitably results in isolation and loneliness. Though Desai's women are not fully cut off from familial and social ties their relationships with others are characterized by dissonance and despair.

On the other hand, Markandaya's women have a deep understanding of life, love and concern towards family members, self-sacrificing nature and also possess practical wisdom of life. They get adjusted with the circumstances and sense that they have been happy and will remain happy in future. This infuses in them a sense of fulfillment and tranquility.

It is clear that Markandaya is a incisive defender of affirmative humanistic values. Her vision is downright realistic and practicable rather than utopian. She places the chief characters amidst various challenges of life in order to assert unconquerable spirit of humanity. The women characters emerge so real that one gets a feeling that one has lived with them and known them most intimately.

Passive acceptance, tranquil resignation is again and again advocated so that one may bend and not break. This typical Indian response to the human predicament is bought out in almost all women characters. Though this spirit of passive acceptance may seem to be a sign of weakness to Western eyes – but in reality it is a sign of their strength. She gives extreme importance to Indian values of life. Talking about her national pride, Meenakshi Mukherjee comments:

Her national pride is seen in the fact that in each one of her novels, it is the East which finally wins.²

Markandaya is of the opinion that Indian women should confidently pursue her own path holding fast to her traditional values and using methods appropriate to her culture. She should also try to assimilate the best in Western culture. Hence, she presents typical India women characters who are adherent strictly to Indian value system. Her practical women characters appear seemingly happier than Desai's women.

Both Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai believe that the character pattern of parents, quality of their interaction with children, and the disturbing or wholesome home environments, all combine together to exert a lasting influence on the tender psyche of a growing child. Both of them focus upon the abiding nature and far reaching of these tenuous links between parents and children on children on childhood. For Kamala Markandaya, the filial link served as bulwark in one's time of need and affliction. These enduring ties, in her novels, become the broad edifice on which the later relationships depend. For instance, Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury* is the story of Mirabai, a young woman from a partly westernized Hindu family in pre independent India. Previously, confident of her place in the Society and her love for her country, Mira begins to question beliefs when her brother Kit returns from Oxford bringing with him a new life style and his friend Richard. Mira's love for Richard grows as the country's agitation against the British gains intensity. Caught in the crossfire are Kit, now a District Magistrate, his wife Premala and Govind Kit's and Mira's adoptive brother, who is rumoured to be the mastermind behind the anti-British violence. Events come to a head when tragedy befalls the family and Mira is forced to choose between her love for Richard and duty towards her country, at the tender age of twelve, Rukmani (**Nectar in a sieve**) understands her parent's inability to marry her to a rich man unlike her sisters. She does not show any resentment towards her parents³. Unlike Maya, (**Cry, the Peacock**) who clutches over the past⁴, Rukhmani praises her parents for preparing her to face the challenges of life positively. She appreciates her father's foresight for teaching her the basics of reading and writing. But the course of parent-child relationship is not consistently smooth in all her novels.

Kamala Markandaya's heroines are not formally educated like Anita Desai's heroines. But they have plenty of common sense called wisdom required for smooth running of life. For instance, Rukmani, Nalini, and Sarojini are quick at modifying themselves according to the changing circumstances. Kamala Markandaya stress the importance of education. Through Rukmani and Nalini, she pleads for better education and employment opportunities so that the inherent biases in the social structure can be removed.

After analyzing the characters of married women in the novels of these writer's, it is clear that environment profiles, experiences of life and education in real sense, played, a vital role in shaping the attitudes and visions of human life, irrespective of the gender. But the attitude can be altered or changed according to the demands of the circumstances. Hence, adults are responsible for their attitude and behaviour regardless of environment, education and experience.

Both the writers discuss the effects of single-parenthood on children. They perceive motherhood to be an important aspect in woman's life. It is the mother who played the key role in shaping the attitude of children. The child who has a mother who listened to his or her inner anguish was considered to be a luckiest child. The influence of mother on the behaviour patterns of the child is more than that of a father.

Both the writers believe in empowerment of Women. They want the women have some vocation in life. Potential unrealized in women turns to pain and later to their destruction. One needs to engage oneself in some activity or other to keep the mind sane. This idea is depicted through the character of Maya's mother-in-law. She feels that women themselves are responsible for their predicament, and so bluntly asserted. "Women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out. All their joy and ambition is channeled that way, while they go parched themselves."⁵

Ultimately, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai, through their fiction, give the message of adjustment and acceptance and not that of a belligerent protest. A woman has to lead normal life in the society assimilating all the aspects of life i.e. love, attraction, hate, trivial quarrels etc. This does not mean they are against woman's need for personal space and individual identity. It is only when some deliberate injustice is done to her or some basic right is willfully violated or snatched from her that she has to rise, stand and fight paying any price.

III CONCLUSION

To sum up, the position of the Indian woman in general, and Indian woman as wife in particular, has been paradoxical. In spite of being a prominent figure in the family, she has lived the life of subjugation, suffering and suppression. However, now she has started becoming conscious of her rights and responsibilities, distress and destination. Accordingly she has waged her war, too. Of course, this was is not going to be easy and short-lived, as it is against human elements like ego, greed, ambition, selfishness, sadism etc. The present period that she is passing through is a transitional

one. And her miles to go before the goal are reached. However, while marching on the selected path, it should also not be forgotten that man-woman relationship can't be restored to the axis of equality and liberty through constitution and legislation alone, but through shared understanding, love, respect a dilution of the egos. Both the writers suggest an honest appraisal of one's own role, strengths and weakness and admiration for the positive qualities of the relationship of spouse, sibling and parent child, can save relationships from disintegration and gives way for serenity of mind and harmonious interaction. The problem is not who would dominate but who would rise to love and understand the other. Love covers, erases and forgives every weakness.⁶

Therefore the responsibility lies in the hands of Indian women as a spouse, sibling or a parent child who has to balance herself smartly between two important things in her life i.e. between her self-identity and family responsibilities. She has to take care that her urge for self-identity is not eroded while fulfilling her family responsibilities.

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