

# SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF ANITA DESAI.

*Dr. (Mrs.) Rana Rashmi  
Assistant Professor,  
M S College, Saharanpur.*

A conscientious reader picks up a novel not merely for narrative delight but for being transported to a world created by a novelist, which is golden, whereas the temporal world made by the maker may be brazen. This globe, when touched by a woman's hands, attains a new type of aestheticism, for none has ever been powerful enough to imprison the beautifying instinct of a woman, whatsoever the limitations might have been. Jane Austen's two inches of ivory and Anita Desai's marble stone of social consciousness march side by side ; this is what is envisaged in the present paper.

Anita Desai as a novelist is known for her non-conformist and anti-establishment views. Her characters do not conform to social values. She appears more interested in creating characters who are 'Nay Sayers'. But at the same time they are conscious about their social set-up. They know that they can fight with society but there is no escape and they will always remain a part of it. Her characters appear to be socially maladjusted. N.R. Gopal says : "They are misfits as social beings".<sup>1</sup> She has not limited herself to the domestic sphere only but at times she goes beyond the limits of family exploring and portraying social prejudices and perverted social values that affect the individual. She herself said:

"There are those who can handle situations and those who can't.... and my stories are generally about those who cannot. They find themselves trapped in situations over which they have no control."<sup>2</sup>

It is Anita Desai's sense of involvement in the social life of India alongwith her sensibility and keen observation. Her dependence on the

-2-

instinct is so great that when she gets down to write her novel she has no plot in her mind. Her novels gradually and instinctively take their own shape. Her characters reveal her vision of life. They share her perception and they set out in quest of meaning. Desai's main preoccupation is to explore the inner world. But the novelist cannot remain indifferent to the problems of the world in which he or she lives. Desai also deals with the changing contemporary situation and presents various social aspects and problems through her fiction.

Her fiction fulfills the requirement as we find the details of Indian social life. All the varied experiences of people are woven together into a meaningful and effective design. Her novels are certainly reflective of social realities from a psychological perspective. She constantly highlights her character's traits, peculiar and tender instincts as crushed by the dehumanization of society. Desai portrays women as not totally cut off from families and societies but women who remain within these orbits and protest against monotony, injustice and humiliation.

Anita Desai's protagonists are unhappy with society in general and cannot communicate with the social milieu on one pretext or the other. They feel disturbed by the pretentiousness and violence in society and nurture utopian dreams. Society demands compromises, which they egotistically abhor. They are all social misfits (Maya, Sita, Nirode, Monisha, Deven, Hugo Uma, etc.) and withdraw from society. The strained conjugal and familial relationship hampers their normal growth. Most of her characters (Amit, Hugo, Deven) are victims of strained relationship with society and with family. They feel observed and trapped when society imposes its norms on them and demand conformity and on refusal by them ostracizes them. Her characters play this existential drama but none of them outlines the situation.

-3-

*Voices in the City* is perhaps Anita's first novel of social atmosphere and locale. The novelist here ventures to juxtapose the external world with the inner one. Desai successfully captures and delineates the spirit of the surrounding place and social values. She explains various social factors connected with the climate, culture, religion, etc., in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. The novel, on the whole, seems as a metaphor indicating every person's difficulty of making a choice when caught in the contrary alternatives in his social life. Her monumental novel, *In Custody* (1984) reveals individual nature the relationship between people and the relationship of the individual to society. In doing so Mrs. Desai evokes the dominant attributes of contemporary Indian society.

*The Village by the Sea* depicts the miserable poverty of the village people on the one side and the impact of industrialization of the villages on the poor people on the other. Anita Desai's attitude to society and human beings is humanistic and classic. Her mirror to society is not doctrinaire or existentialist, it is loving too. She has not created a region for the setting of her novels like Hardy's *Wessex* and R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi* but she places her characters

in various cities and gives a complete pen-picture of the locale, be it Calcutta, Bombay, London or Delhi. The environment has always a crucial role to play. The sordidness, the brutality and the sheer dreariness of the physical world is the force against which Anita Desai's characters revolt. They find that they are unable to fulfil social expectations or play their ordained roles. Hence, they face a sense of rootlessness, isolation and alienation. Maya needed contact, relationship, communion with society to soothe the disturbed, agitated mind but in vain presents all the problems and sorrows of an alienated being in modern society. Monisha feels totally neglected, isolated and lonely even in a bustling, joint family in crowded Calcutta. Thus from the very beginning what Desai portrays is the deeply felt

-4-

and suffered rebellion against the entire system of social relationships.

*In Journey to Ithaca* Sophie and Matteo represent the socio-religious aspect of Indian society. Matteo, Sophie's husband burns inside to possess oriental knowledge and to live his life according to the traditions of Indian society. Sophie is quite logical and modern as to believe the healing power of saints of India. She considers people's faith in such gurus, a sign of backwardness. This novel deals with the issue of traditional social pattern of Indian society and modern culture of the West.

Anita Desai's latest novel, *Fasting, Feasting* suggests that oppression of women in India today is directly related to the corrupt customs and culture. The novel throws light on certain social practices of modern India. In the first point there is elation over the birth of a boy. The status of woman is raised when she bears a son. Desai's subversion of this manifestation of patriarchal values is apparent in her tone. The deprivation of a girl child of her schooling and studies might have been normal in middle-class families. Marriage is seen as the only career for the girl and home is her confinement. The novel exposes the degrading and exploitative nature of the dowry system. The novel shows that dowry has become means of procuring money and much deception is practiced to obtain it. The treatment and humiliation meted out to a girl by her in-laws is realistically portrayed.

Anamika had been beaten. Anamika was beaten regularly by her mother-in-law while her husband stood by and approved or at least, did not object. Anamika spent her entire time in the kitchen, cooking for a family, that was so large that meals were served in shifts - first the men, then the children, finally the women. She herself ate the remains in the pots, before scouring them.<sup>3</sup>.

Daughters in this society are denied autonomy. Uma and her sister

Aruna are not given any privacy, as daughters are seen as possessions to be used in a manner as suits the parents. In the third attempt of marrying, Uma was married to a man who is many years her senior and who already has a wife and many children. The picture of the traditional society of India is painted here in dark colours. The novel throws light on the false dichotomy between the private and public life in this society.

Thus we have found that the novels of Anita Desai are critical essays on man's relationship to society. Her protagonists possess a defiant individuality. They discard the commonplace conformity and stick to their own vision of life. Desai wants to attract attention towards the subordination of women to men in the Indian milieu. Her novels reinforce the perception that woman's status *vis-a-vis* man is not ordained by God rather it has been determined and conditioned by society and is therefore always open to fresh determination as the social order revolves. Desai does not remain untouched from the central issue of conflict between the traditional social pattern and the modern scientific pattern. The role of inorganic forces of society brings newness in Desai's fiction. The female protagonists like Maya, Sita, Monisha, Leila, have been shown suffering because of their failure to reconcile with their social surroundings and social obligations. The social forces remain a riddle to be solved by her characters.

#### **WORK CITED**

1. Anand, T.S., *Images of Women in Fiction*, New Delhi : Creative Books, 2003, p. 40.
2. Rao, Madhushree Sinha, 'Silent Spaces of Inner Vastness', *Times of India*, Delhi, 18 June 1992.
3. Desai, Anita, *Fasting, Feasting*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1989.