

Shifting Identity : A Comparative Study of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Shobha De's *Second Thoughts*

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Abstract. A woman enjoys relationship at various levels – as a wife, mother, sister, friend and companion, however still very much the life of an average woman depends on her father, brother, husband and son. Consequently she loses her own identity and makes a frantic effort to rise above the state of utter dependency. She can ascend to the very pinnacle of self-realisation and can free herself from psychic fears and the bondage of centuries. A group of the Indian English women novelists as Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Manju Kapur et al have tried to explore the issues related to the position of woman in the post independence India. Anita Desai and Shobha De particularly through their writings have tried to explore the feminine psyche in the complex cultural stress and strain of Indian society. An attempt has been made in the present study to identify the concept of man - woman relationship with reference to two novels – Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Shobha De's *Second Thoughts*. On the one hand in *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai probes the feminine sensibility and a woman's inherent desire to know herself in terms of not only her relationship with the members of her family but also in terms of her individual identity, while on the other in *Second Thoughts* Shobha De most unlike Anita Desai exposes the hollowness of marital relationship in elite class. The present paper will make a comparative study on exploring the psyche of two women – Nanda Kaul on the one hand and Maya on the other in respect of the treatment given to them by their husbands. It will also focus on the theme of identity crisis.

Keywords : Psyche; identity; conscious; suffering; marital relationship.

The quest for identity or liberation and achievements of it in various ways are predominant features of Indian women's writings. Anita Desai and Shobha De write on the quest for order and meaning in the life of Indian women. Their novels depict the anguish, pain and conflict of the modern educated women caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand and self - expression and independence, on the other. Though Indian women are educated, employed and are economically independent, financial freedom alone is not enough. Family, marriage and social norms bind them completely and provoke conflict in their mind and make them restless. Prasanna Sree views Indian women thus :

The Indian women – She is the one who is
torn between tradition and modernity, she is
one who is in search of self-identity, she is the

Received : 23rd May, 2017; Accepted : 6th June, 2017

one who tries to give shape and content to individual existence in a sexiest society.
(Prasanna Sree 1991: 12)

Anita Desai intends to expose the inner psyche of the character in her novels. The modern life especially that of the middle class women is burdened with mental stress, unfulfilled aspirations and unsatisfied desires in marital relationship. She portrays the inner conflicts of their characters and also underlines their individuality and quest for freedom from the patriarchal society. Her women know how they have been trapped and how they can begin to live afresh but the obstacle is man, who enters their world as a disturbing factor. Anita Desai's female characters fail to adjust to the harsh realities of life. And ultimately they have to compromise in one way or the other. In her novels they always feel themselves "outsiders". Maya in *Cry The Peacock*, Monisha in *Voices in the City* and Nanda Kaul in *Fire on The Mountain* – they fail to adjust to the realities of life and ultimately reach an unhappy end. As A.R. Gopal has pointed out :

Characters in the novels of Mrs. Anita Desai are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive but sequestered in a surrounding as a consequence of their failures or unwillingness to adjust with the reality. They often differ in their opinion from other and embark on a long voyage of contemplation in order to find the meaning of their existence.

(Gopal 1995:7)

In the novels of Anita Desai, almost all the protagonists wrestle with the force working against their individual identity in society.

Shobha De has drawn a real picture of the new women who defy the age old practice of suppression of women in almost all walks of life. The women are strong enough to say a big no to every unfair treatment meted out to them. They are a set of well equipped women, rich, well-educated, talented and ambitious. De's women are powerful. They do not hesitate to challenge the socially approved male hegemony on the basic issues of life. Her women are calculative and use men as means to end, the end begins the fulfilment of their aim to become rich, famous and independent. The characters of almost all the women in De's novels exhibit this quality. From Karuna and Anjali in *Socialite Evenings* to Maya in *Second Thoughts*, all have men as their ladder to acquire riches and fame. De explores the lives of bored housewives and their loveless rich husband and family. These women try to expose themselves and compete with men in all areas like power, position and sexuality. In Shobha De's novels she is all out to improve upon the traditional image of the Indian women as a weak, docile person living at the mercy of her

partner. She reshapes her women characters as aggressive blasters of the male ego and male hierarchy. De has observed that the women in her books are definitely not doormats. They are not willing to be kicked around. She is of the firm belief that women will be men's equal parts in all spheres of life.

Anita Desai's fifth novel *Fire on the Mountain* exemplifies the truth of individual existence that suffering is constantly a part of life. Conflict, struggles, death, problems, chance happenings are all inevitable in life. Like Anita Desai's other novels it also highlights the reality of the complexities of human relationship. *Fire on the Mountain* is the story of the agonized cry of Nanda Kaul, an old woman. She suffers due to a conflict between her desire for withdrawal to preserve her wholeness and integrity and the need for involvement in life. The world has been too much with her as there had been continuous calls and claims upon her. Her crowded life as the wife of Vice-chancellor is ordinary about :

There had been too many guests coming and going, tongas and rickshaws pilled up under the eucalyptus tree and the bougainvillea, their drivers asleep on the seats with their feet hanging over the bars. (Desai 2008 :32)

Kaul's social status and affluence of many has no doubt, raised her on social ladder but she is sick and starved emotionally. Her life with her husband is totally meaningless and empty as a bird in a golden cage :

Mentally she stalked through the rooms of that house – his house never hers – very carefully closing the curve-screen doors behind her to keep out the flies, looking sharply to see if the dark furniture, all rosewood, had been polished and the doors of the gigantic cupboards properly shut.(20)

She wants to get herself detached from this age but she lacks the courage to do it. Malashri Lal remarks :

In her is the desire to escape traditional constraints but lacks the volition to do so. (Lal 1984:251)

There is a secret yearning in every Indian woman to develop a remarkable stance which is limited only to with discharge her duties as a daughter, wife or mother. Nanda Kaul has spent her life for the welfare of, catering to her husband's needs, bringing up her children and exhausting all her energy in performing her duties as a wife and a mother respectively. This can't be stated as something unusual or extraordinary for this is expected of all women to perform all household chores

in Indian context. Every married woman has to shoulder responsibility of the household, the husband and the children. She ignores her desires, crushes her ambitions and sacrifices her friends, relatives etc. and merges with the family losing her identity. She believes that if she is good and dutiful the others will treat her with love. But the realities of life give her a raw deal. Her husband's faithlessness in having a life long extra – marital relationship with Miss David, a member of the teaching staff is unfortunate. Her husband did not love her as a wife but treated her as a decorative and useful instrument needed for the efficient running of his household. Though she enjoyed the comforts and social status of the wife, she felt lonely, neglected in the heart of her hearts but she was helpless and couldn't revolt to show her unhappy state of being. Her husband's affairs lead to her tension and trauma. He had never,

loved and cherished and kept her like a queen. He had only done enough to keep her quiet. While he carried out a life long affair with Miss David, the mathematician mistress whom he had not married because he had loved, all his life loved.

(Desai 2008 :145)

Nanda bears this affair with a frozen smile on her face. She looks after the family, his house, his children, shutting the door, supervising the cooks and servants, entertaining the guests very efficiently with a maintained pose. She loses her individuality and identity. Her relationship with her husband was nothing beyond the duties and obligations. Externally everything appeared to be free from harshness but internally she burned with a fire of frustration. When she heard about herself :

...the wives and daughters of the lecturers and professors over whom her husband ruled. (19)

Nanda Kaul feels a deep yearning to be alone. This peculiar longing comes out of the hollow life she has led with the Vice-Chancellor. He had always desired her to be in silk and she was the centre of the hectic activity going on in the household. One day Mr. Kaul called at her in awe and whispered almost in her hearing :

Isn't she splendid? Isn't she like a queen? Really Vice-chancellor is always to have a wife who can run everything as she does. (19)

When she heard she felt disheartened but only she knew her agony of being the wife of the Vice-chancellor. Nanda Kaul has been betrayed in marital relationship and for this reason she believes that all the love and sacrifices made by her are not valued, it is a waste. Nanda appears as a victim, who envelops herself with a feigned indifference solely to protect herself from harsh life. With her husband

she arrives at Carignano for self-discovery. Somehow she tries to hide her hollow interior with her solid exterior. She enjoys the perfect peace and tranquility of the hills:

...on the ridge of the mountain. In the quiet house. It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life-as she realised on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowing of relief... (3)

She becomes so engrossed with the beauty and serenity of Kasauli that she doesn't even wish to have the company of her great granddaughter, Raka and her childhood friend Ila Das. The intrusion of both these characters links her with the past. P. D. Dubey has rightly commented :

The garden of Carignano is a projection of Nanda Kaul's yearning for loneliness and privacy. Nanda likes many of us portrays to be an assertive, strong personality whereas inside she was totally shattered by her husband's infidelity. Nanda discovers herself in Raka, because Raka is what Nanda always wanted to be. (Dodiya 2000 : 118)

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* presents the plight of hypersensitive women. Anita Desai explores the psyche of Nanda Kaul. She focuses on the fate of married women in Indian society. Like Nanda Kaul, the female characters of her novels fail to bear the oppression of society and family that finally breaks off from the oppressive forces.

Second Thoughts is an astringent saccharine love chronicle of the nineties representing middle class society. It is the story of Maya, a young and attractive woman who goes into an arranged marriage with Ranjan, a bank executive. She had liked Ranjan at her very first meeting with him. Another reason for liking Ranjan was her desire to be a part of the Mumbai world which to her is like a dream and of glamour and beauty :

Bombay smelt well so did Calcutta, but it was a different smell. (De 2013:1)

Maya hails from an educated middle class family of Calcutta and had dreamed of having a career in designing. But Ranjan turns out to be mama's boy who hardly cares for Maya's sentiments. Maya has all the material comforts but she lacks the basic comfort of receiving her husband's love. She is mortified by Ranjan's mother obsession. He wants Maya to follow his mother as her ideal :

If you need company, call my mother. She knows Bombay inside out. She has lived here for over twenty-five years. Whenever she can spare the time, she'll let you accompany her to the market. (61)

Maya suffers an unfulfilled sexual relationship with Ranjan. He turns out to be a cold sexual partner to Maya. During their tenure of honeymoon, one night she asked him about his past relationship with other girls. She insisted on him to let her know his past. Ranjan was a bachelor in and out. As she said :

When I recognised that fact, it endeared Ranjan to me. Here I was at twenty-three with only one 'kissing boyfriend' behind me. And there was the foreign educated, modern, confident Bombay boy of twenty-eight who had never known another women. I'd married a virgin. (52)

She needs physical fulfillment. A continuous frustration of the physical fulfillment needs can be disastrous to anybody. Freud comments in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*:

The more strictly a woman has been brought up and the more sternly she has submitted to the demands of civilization, the more she is afraid of taking this way out; and in the conflict between her desires and her sense of duty, she once more seeks refuge in a neurosis. Nothing protects her virtue as securely as illness. (Freud 1960:51)

Maya's thirst for love and affection is growing day by day. Her husband shows total indifference towards her emotional requirements. Her husband is by no means a passionate person. So she feels that her husband doesn't have a genuine interest in her. So she began to despise herself. She said sadly as she sat by the window:

I had never felt so useless. Nobody needed me, absolutely nobody. My parents no longer thought I belonged to them. My husband belonged to his mother. (58)

During this period of utter loneliness and misery, a college going boy named Nikhil Verma came into her life. He was very charming. He with his systematic efforts, won her heart. In the beginning, she avoided his advances like a chaste woman. But when she was convinced that her life was full of misery and her whole being

was useless and unwanted she began to think of him. She was quite aware of the fact that Nikhil was other than her lawful man. She also knew well that to make friendship with him was an act of breach of social and moral code. But when her all hopes and dreams as well as her attempts to seek love from her legitimate husband failed, she decided to strike up friendship with Nikhil. She allowed herself to be enjoyed and loved the company of Nikhil. She felt the beauty and pleasure of life. That is why she dared to get on outing with Nikhil at Malabar. She admits :

I was ready to jump on Nikhil's motorbike and say "good-bye" to my uninspiring life without the slightest regret. (247)

Of course, she feels scared by pangs of guilty that she takes the path of betrayal. But she is forced to do so. Nikhil stands in quite contrast with Ranjan, Ranjan is very conservative and cool whereas Nikhil is modern, quite young, energetic and cheerful person. It is Nikhil who brings joy and happiness in Maya's life. Some days after her encounter with Nikhil, she came to know through Nikhil's mother that he was betrothed to a girl named Anshu. This news left Maya motionless. She was able to control her feelings. As she says :

I felt bad that I had betrayed Ranjan. May be I should have asked his permission about such things. I felt awful about doing this behind his back. I felt like a sneak, or a thief. (212)

In this way, Maya has learnt a new way of life. She has broken social and moral code to protect herself and to establish her identity.

In the novels of the women writers we come across a varied hue of Indian women – traditional, both traditional and modern, and the ultra-modern. Traditional women who still retain their individuality are seen in the novels of Anita Desai. Women who challenge in their quest for self-fulfilment are portrayed in the novels of Shobha De. Anita Desai's women do not belong to the class of the new women. Desai's protagonist, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* suffers from a sense of alienation and loss of identity which is expressed in her neurotic outbursts and self-annihilation. This happens because she could not take up any daring reformative steps to ameliorate her tragic situations caused by her adherence to social and family values. She is rather weak and self-destructive. Nanda and her friend Ila Das have no other way to get out of the vicious circle and live alone. But Shobha De's protagonist, Maya, in *Second Thoughts* is totally different. It presents the pathetic plight of newly wedded woman, Maya who suffers for no fault of her own. In this process she discovers the joy and is free from the shackles of social morality. Although the conflict for autonomy and separate identity remains an

unfinished combat. Because Shobha De's heroines on the other hand remain loyal to traditional norms of the society while on the other they want to establish their identity in their own ways.

Indeed, Anita Desai and Shobha De bear a curious resemblance to one another in certain respects but are yet very different in many aspects. The two novelists belong to urban middle class, English-educated society, and deal with the world of women. But one important difference is that Anita, Desai's protagonists sacrifice and tolerate all types of ignorance and difficulties to make their husbands and family happy. Shobha De's protagonists are bold enough to cross all limitations through which they may get success not only in job, education but also in extra-marital affairs. Actually they try to shift their identities from those women who never oppose ill factors of their life and sacrifice their life to survive family and husband. Shobha De's protagonists establish their own identities and use man as a ladder of success and make bright and very effectual identity before the society.

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