

NERGIS DALAL IN TRADITION OF RUTH JHABVALA AND ANITA DESAI

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Abstract:

Literary legacy of Indian English writing would have suffered from draught of female manifestations had not been there Anita Desai, Ruth Jhabwala, Kamla Markandey, Sudha Murthy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Bannerjee, Kiran Desai etc to dribble it with the clear stream of their expressions. It was their ceaseless effort that Indian English writing has made its place before their foreign counterparts. Writing, has remained the monopoly of male writers since long but the initiation of female authors enlarged the dimension by giving voice to untold miseries unheard experiences and unwritten encounters. Women novelists have come out of their outer shell of the themes of freedom struggle; social exploitation and other problems, emerged out of poverty concentrated in their work from extrinsic to intrinsic self of the individual especially of female. Novels of these fiction writers are testimony how women cope with the realities of life or how sometimes when the circumstances are unbearable they succumb. Contemporary women writers find the theme of identity crisis, alienation, existentialism more alluring. In the tradition of these writers one more name that could not touch the sky of fame, although the blitz of her writing has the same sheen, is Nergis Dalal. She has also reflected all these themes in her novel. Disparate streams of the works of these contemporary writers Nergis Dalal, Anita Desai and Ruth Jhabwala sometimes sparkle with the streak of same themes manifested in different style.

Key Words: Tradition, Women Writers, Themes, Fiction

Introduction:

As post modern era of Indian English writers witnessed spurt of many women writers who became voice of the milieu. Ruth Praver Jhabwala is also one such writer although she has been caught in the controversy whether to regard her as Indian English writer or not. In one of her confessional autobiographical essay published in London Magazine she has exposed her heart out- "I have lived in India for most of my adult life. My husband is Indian. I am not and less so every year,....However, I must admit that I am no longer interested in India, What I am interested in now is myself in India."(7-8) Ruth Praver Jhabwala is a German born British and American Novelist. She has a dozen novels 23 screenplays and eight collections of short stories to her credit. Her stature has been exalted by opulence of honours and awards, She has won Booker prize for her novel Heat and Dust and Academy award for two times as a screenwriter, two Oscar awards for her screenplays and the list is very long. She is renowned more for her collaboration with Merchant Ivory Production. She was chosen as CBE in 1998 and granted a joint fellowship by BAFTA in 2002 with Ivory and Merchant. She is the only person to have won both a Booker Prize and an Oscar. Although she sees fiction as her vocation, she is better known as the screenwriter in the long cinematic partnership of director James Ivory

and producer Ismail Merchant. Over 40 years she has written more than two dozen screenplays, from original scripts set in India, to adaptations of classic novels by E.M. Forster and Henry James.

Anita Desai, a female novelist is among such stars that are fortune's favourite and have been drenched in lavish praise not only of readers but also of critics. She probes deep into the heart of women and presents before the readers the conflict, the dilemma, the psyche, the state of mind, the contradictions and predicament of these female characters. The female precursor of psychological novels, Anita Desai has given a new form to the female consciousness. Her novels are the peep hole into a woman's heart where one can see the detachment, the alienation and that psychological void which cannot be filled. Her heroines are not bold enough to survive the blow of emotions and find life unbearable. Concentrating mostly on the women sensibility Desai's *métier* is quest for identity of her heroines She was premier Indian English writer when the dawn of legendry writers was waiting in the wings. She is the one whose presence promised new possibilities in the fields of literature on global map assuring to fill that void which was yet to be felt on world class literature and opened a new vista of psychological writing by permeating her way in the heart of woman following suit of Virginia woolf. Anita Desai is also a pioneer in writing on feminist issues. Although many people would not classify her as feminist writer yet she has her due to bring into the light the sub-conscious aspects of women. She herself says "Women think I am doing disservice to the feminist movement by writing about women who have no control over their lives. But I was trying, as every writer tries to do, even in fiction, to get at the truth, write the truth. It would have been really fanciful if I had made [for example, in *Clear Light of Day*] Bim and Tara modern-day feminists "(in Griffiths).

Nergis Dalal is also a name known for introducing the tradition of manifestation of azoic chords of the hearts as well as speculations of the mind. She has taken the art one step ahead on the path of immortality with her works. She is a writer who has given true meaning to her own name by sprinkling aroma of her beautiful vision, drenching her readers in the fragrance to the core and carving a niche for herself in the literary firmament. Her versatility has its testimony in her contribution not only in the field of fiction but also in the field of middles, and a book for children. Far from the dazzle of fame her oversensitive heart endeavours sometimes to give twinkle of smile on the face of readers or to cause tears of empathy, or to incite cogitation, or to affect anger, or to sway change, or sometimes to instill enrichment and sometimes only to galvanize against wrong. She had her appearance on the screen of literature from the age of seventeen and had a long span of career pervading over seven decades. She earned for herself the title 'Middle Queen' by contributing her entertaining, cognitive, interesting, enriching 2000 middles to various newspapers. Contribution was so profuse that the editor advised her to write in real name also besides writing in pseudonym 'Aries'. The Times of India started the middle section in the newspaper in 1940 and Nergis was one of its first contributors. But the writing instincts did not let her confined to these middles only and she switched over to fiction writing and witnessed the sprouting of Indian novels in English by women.

Comparative Study of the Trio:

The three contemporary writers who have not only added charm to the Indian English Writing but also opened new vistas of thinking towards new themes through their writings. They all have exploited their mixed culture upbringing and have brought the theme of East-West encounter, cross cultural dissonance in marital relation besides man-woman relationship. All the three novelists stand on the equal footing while talking about feminine sensibility. They want to bring the woman out of her suppression, suffocation and shackles of generations. They have given the real meaning to literature as they not only entertain but also bring change in the outlook of people by indicating the maladies of society. While talking about man-woman relationship they are conscious about marital discord, extra marital affairs, vitiated relations, infidelity, domestic violence and exploitation of female.

Cry, The Peacock by Anita Desai shows how incongruous relation lugs a happy, lively life towards her predicament of suicide. Anita in *Minari* by Nergis Dalal Searches for her own identity and is distracted towards a womanizer Tejpore to fulfil her needs. Olivia, a girl from Overseas in *Heat and Dust* by Jhabvala also finds life boring and writes her own predicament. Emotion on the part of woman and reason on the part of male procreate clashes and the dreamy heart of woman find it hard to bear.

Theme of East- West Encounter as reflected in the novels of all the three novelists indicates the same vision that "Separate cultures should remain separate. Although human beings have their own personal lives they are yet in some measure the victims and promoters of a collective spirit, whose years, according to Jung, are counted in centuries."(Dalal 101) All the five heroines in the novel *The Girls from Overseas* are caught between two cultures, one western, excessively inclined towards physical comfort and materialism and the other Eastern swayed towards emotional and spiritual pursuits. As Lousie asserts

"You know, foreigners marrying Indians should be given an orientation course. We take too many things for granted. We should be warned that the necessities of life-or what we think of as the necessities of life-water, electricity, cooking gas, working telephones and so on-are things that work only sometimes, and more often than not one has to do without."(2)

The grudges are at the heights as Jane's mother reacts on her decision to marry with an Indian-"On the last day her mother had said, 'I would rather you were dead than married to an Indian.'" (P. 14) In her novel *A Backward Place* Jhabvala also portrays the maladjustment on the part of western ladies who come to India. Although Judy adjusts herself, Etta is in the worst conditions and share the same feelings as Jhabvala - "We may praise Indian democracy, go into raptures over Indian music, admire Indian intellectuals- but whatever we say, not for a moment should we lose sight of the fact that a very great number of Indians never get enough to eatcan one lose sight of the fact?" (8)

Myself in India in An Experience John Murray Rootless stay of the foreigner in India and of the Indian who has become too westernized to feel at home with his own people, the clash between the old and the new... all call for Jhabvala's attention which is devoid of any malevolence. With her touch of sympathetic description even the most satiric situation is subsidized. *Bye Bye Blackbird* by Anita Desai also scrutinizes the East-West Encounter and the consequences of it. Sarah, an English woman has to lose her identity, her culture, her people when she is attracted to marry a Bengali youth Adit . Her loneliness, her alienation, her detachment after this results in her being anaemic and depressed. Neeru Chakraverty says-"In contrast to her husband's intimacy with his group of friends, Sarah is characterized by alienation, lone lines sand a sense of entrapment. ...rather the narrative stresses her total isolation even in her own country.(Chakraverty, Neeru. "Identity, Exile and Alienation", Quest of Self Fulfillment in the Novels of Anita Desai, Delhi, Authorpress, 2003, p. 124)

All the three novelists have the same streak of opinion that the perceptions of these foreign women are conditioned by their own culture and they have their own cultural affiliation and ethnocentrism to assess others by their own values and beliefs which hinders in adjustment. These writers also have similarity of opinion that the root of the crisis of human being is traced in his or her childhood experience. *In Skin Deep* by Nergis Dalal Naaz' s bleak childhood which is filled with partial attitude of everyone even of her mother has indelible impact on her later life. "A happy childhood imprints itself on the rest of one's life. Without this, people do recover, but the scars remain forever."(Dalal 154). She shudders to hear when she herself is conceived with twins. In *Cry, The Peacock*, Maya is also unable to adjust due to her over pampered childhood and expects the same fatherly affection from her husband.

Alienation, Identity crisis, loneliness are the main themes of the trio. While these novelists have similarity of vision, some of their themes differ totally from others as Nergis Dalal is lured to write the whole novel on the theme of Yoga. She explores the theme, depicting not only the utility of this ancient treasure of knowledge to remain healthy but also shows the difference of the true yogi and the spurious one. Each of her novels represents different theme as *Minari* shows the quassation of life in a small town Minari, which is situated faraway from the humdrum of city life. *Skin Deep* and *The Sisters*, both the novels show conflict between twin sisters who are pole apart in features as well as nature. *The Inner Door* is based on the journey of a spurious saint (whom the circumstances forced to be so) who becomes the real savior yogi at the end. *The Girls from Overseas* shows five western ladies meeting their fate in the alien culture. With varied major themes Dalal brings numerous sub-themes and tickles the conscious of readers.

Desai has chosen to bring the feelings of suppressed women into light whether they belong to middle class or higher class, educated or uneducated. Her inclination towards bringing out the invisible twinge of pain of female world is revealed in all her female protagonists. She differs from Dalal as Dalal's heroines are mostly bold and face the situation with aberrant courage Desai's heroines are weak and succumbs to circumstances at the time of crisis. Jhabvala's female characters also do not show that extraordinary courage as Desai's. Naaz *In Skin Deep*, although hurt and upset at the proposal of divorce yet she creates the situation of the death of her own husband, Maya Jason in *The Girls from Overseas* shows no emotions even when her husband Jason escapes to avoid arrest, Rula in *Minari* is also extraordinarily bold as she has the courage to say no at the marriage proposal of the most powerful man of Minari after their break-up.

She often writes of the disorientation of Westerners encountering life in India. Several female characters in her fiction have caught up in ill-fated love affairs or are swept along by currents of a world they didn't understand. She is interested mainly in private lives of her characters. Like Henry James and EM Forster, the two writers whose work she has successfully adapted, she focuses on the personal revelations and assertions that affect relationships with places and people. Their style to treat the theme is totally different. Anita Desai, treading on the path of Virginia Woolf treats the theme psychologically and presents the glimpses of the heart of her protagonists. The heart-ache of Maya, Sarah, Uma, Anamika takes concrete form in her novel. Anita has deep knowledge of human nature, so she is able to show it when she reveals the development of traits into psychic malady. Maya has father fixation, Dev suffers from a "Caliban Complex", Bim wishes to perpetuate the past, Nirode suffers from claustrophobia. Asnani considers her forte to be "the exploration of the interior world, plunging into the limitless depths of mind, and bringing into relief the hidden contours of the human psyche." (P 5).

While Desai's forte is psychological writing, Jhabvala writes about her perception of India. The things which enchants her in the beginning, becomes abominable later and this sprouts sometimes in the form of satire. She makes her readers laugh at the incongruities of human being as it is the source of humour in her novels. Desai has said a lot through her symbols subconsciously. Names of characters of her novels are symbolic as Maya symbolizes life and worldly entanglements while Gautama symbolizes detachment and rationalism. Name of her novels are also symbolic as in *Cry, The Peacock*, peacock is the symbol of the protagonist Maya, *Voices in the City* symbolizes the voices of various sensitive artists in different moods.

Dalal with her different themes tells her story in a straightforward manner with few embellishments. She has woven simple plot taking, the theme of twin sisters conflict, Yoga and East- West encounter. Sometimes she adopts the aphoristic style to bring her ideas before the readers in condensed form. Her conversational style offers revelation of character in an impressive way. As in her novel 'The Girls from Overseas' conversation between Maya and Jason brings into light the characteristics of all the five protagonists. As the description of Lousie-“ But Lousie works very hard trying to make her marriage a success, making adjustment, trying to understand and fit herself into a society which resembles hardly at all the one that she has known.” (46)

In manner of characterization also the three novelists are different Dalal has shown her preference in depicting minute details of physical beauty of her characters. She has depicted mostly bold protagonists who face all the situation with extraordinary fervor. Naaz in *Skin Deep*, Rula and Tejpore in *Minari*, Rahul in *The Inner Door* and all the five western ladies with Jason and Maya show their aptitude to face the adverse situation with tolerance and intrepidity. Prudence, endurance, discretion and conscience are the hallmark of all her heroines. Characters of Jhabvala are the peephole to have the glimpse of India from them. Indian society with all its aspects is shown through her characters. Her heroines are oversensitive and remain immersed in their world of dreams and imagination as a result they are alienated from their own surrounding and find it hard to adjust themselves. They are also not bold enough and sometimes succumb to sexual exploitation, being unable to solve the mystery of their suffering. Jhabvala has also shown moral degradation and corruption in religious centre through her female characters. She has shown the reality of God –men (swamiji) of India-

“They placed their faith in Swamiji thinking he will bring succor to their tormented souls and transform them into new unified beings at peace with themselves and the world. Instead we have a sordid picture of selfish manipulation, social abuse, midnight orgies and callousness verging on cruelty. The Swamiji treat them as his possession.”(S.Krishnaswamy. 325)

Anita Desai being, a psychological novelist writes mostly about the atmosphere of mind of the characters, Her female characters are sensitive, emotional, while male characters are realistic and rational. They are often inconsiderate and insensitive to the suffering. Gautama in *Cry, The Peacock* is philosophical , detached, Adit in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Raman in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is insensitive. They lack empathetic attitude towards their female counterparts. The peculiar quality of her characterization is that she connects her characters with external objects or landscape. Maya is associated with Peacock, Nirode's mother is identified with Kali in the city of Calcutta, Sita identifies herself with eagle. Dalal has also shown loneliness, alienation, identity crisis, lack of communication in her long as well as short fiction. Anita is alienated as her husband Ranjan is too busy to spend time with her so she has the escapist tendency in 'Minari'. She wants to be like Rula, a widow journalist. All the heroines in her novel 'The Girls from Overseas' suffer from the same malady. They are unable to adjust themselves in the Indian atmosphere and release the burden of the heart in their meetings. “Their weekly meetings were safety valves- analyst's couch and confessional at one and the same time.” (3)

The worst adjusted Gertrude lives a life of stranger in her own house with her husband as she never wants to be adjusted in the separate culture. Social consciousness is also the most vital aspect of a writer. Contemporary women writers are sensitive enough to their social surroundings and try to place mirror before it in their novels. Whereas Dalal has raised the issues of dowry, separate culture maladjustment, inconstancy on the part of male members, dominance of male members in the patriarchal society, compulsion of marriage, identity crisis etc, Desai also depicts plight of women in a patriarchal society, women exploited by their own near and dear ones, the invisible wounds at their heart, alienation, identity crisis etc. Anamika in her novel *Fasting, Feasting* represents all those women who are exploited in society. She has been married with a man much older denying the opportunity of scholarship in Oxford University. The house of in-laws is not less than hell for her as she is beaten regularly by them. Desai has given a picture of over tortured female who are sacrificed in the name of honour of family. Marriage is more important than an oxford degree. Anamika is beaten and suffers a miscarriage only to be sent back to her parents, house as rejected commodity. The novel throws light on many mean and nasty practices prevalent in society. Woman is the quintessential victim of society.

Dalal has also shown the evils of society. Compulsion of marriage brings in its trail so many evils, oppressions that are irremediable. In her novel 'Skin Deep' Sunita, a mentally retarded child has to suffer the cruelty of society. She has been married on the basis of dowry but the lap of flames becomes her fate at the end. To her in-laws the burden of household chores takes away her happiness and leaves a pale withered face only to hug death as the final predicament. "Dowry deaths, as they were called, were widely prevalent all over India. People who might have hesitated to trap a rat and kill it thought nothing of pouring kerosene over a young woman and throwing a lighted match to turn her into a living torch."(.203) Man-woman relationship has not lost its vitality in the novels of Dalal also. She has shown the separate culture maladjustment in her novel 'Skin Deep' where JJ marries a foreigner for whom to adjust in a Parsi family especially with typical Parsi mother-in-law, brings disharmony in the relationship of husband- wife. Relation of Naaz and Ramesh is also on the basis of need only where Naaz marries due to attraction, Ramesh marries for the reason that money of Naaz can bring happiness to their family. Their marriage which can be said to be on the term of convenience comes to be broken as Ramesh falls in romantic love with his own sister-in-law. All the sacrifices and all the ordeals, endured by Naaz culminates in the statement of Ramesh in asking for divorce. The whole story of convenience and comfort ends in the same anguish tolerated by woman only. Instead of succumbing to the circumstances she finds her way out. Another couple Anita and Ranjan cannot be said to be as happy. Disharmony and maladjustment hovers here also. Anita who has high ideas of marital life, is unable to bear too much involvement of her husband in the business of tea-state. She feels neglected and complains again and again.

Like Sita she also wants to run away from her home. She also suffers from father fixation. Over busy schedule of her husband, reserved nature, simple attitude is contradictory to her romantic, oversensitive nature as on her birthday she expects lavish gifts rolled in love like she used to get before marriage but Ranjan forgets her birthday. She doesn't get what her romantic nature requires of him. Her stories also show dissatisfaction and maladjustment in married life. Desai also tells the story of extra marital affairs in her novel *Fire on the Mountain* and *Voices in the City*.

The Above discussion clearly establishes the fact that Dalal has continued the the tradition established by the eminent women Indian writers. There is plethora of similarities as for the theme and treatment in their fiction. Dalal has left no stone unturned in addressing the issues dealing with major aspects of women life.

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