
Perception Compared and Contrasted in the selected Novels of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharti Mukherjee

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ABSTRACT:

The paper focuses on comparison and contrast in the selected novels of Anita Desai, Bharti Mukherjee and Shashi Deshpande, who bear a curious resemblance to one another in certain respects but yet very different in many aspects

Keywords : *Mental Trauma, Suffering, Self Realization, Seclusion, Gender Discrimination*

The paper focuses on comparison and contrast in the novels of Anita Desai, Bharti Mukherjee and Shashi Deshpande, who bear a curious resemblance to one another in certain respects but yet very different in many aspects.

Anita Desai is of mixed German and Indian parentage, her novels are well entrenched in Indian soil, her novels revolve round the working of the mind of her women characters. Shashi Deshpande like Anita Desai does objective writing; she maintains a distance between herself and her works. Her novels revolve around the women protagonists' struggle to realize themselves in a patriarchal society. Like Desai and Bharti Mukherjee, Deshpande is averse to being dubbed a feminist writer just because her novels are preeminently spun around women characters. She admits her empathy with the fair sex and says:

“As writing is born out of personal experience, the fact that I am a woman is bound to surface. Besides only a woman would write my books – they are written from the inside, as it were. Just as a woman cannot get deeply under a man's skin so too a man cannot fully appreciate the feminine experience.”¹

Unlike Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, Mukherjee deals with the external world and her novels are not set in the psyche of the protagonists.

Female protagonists occupy a pivotal position in the novels of Desai, Deshpande and Mukherjee. Maya in Cry, The Peacock, Uma in Fasting Feasting, Nanda Kaul and Raka in Fire on the Mountain are Desai's female protagonists.

Similarly, Deshpande's fictional world is also dominated by the female protagonists – Sarita or Saru in The Dark Holds No Terrors, Jaya in That Long Silence and Urmila in The Binding Vine come to the fore and mouth their stories.

Mukherjee's fictional world is too dominated by the female protagonists – Tara Lata and two sisters, Jyothi in Jasmine and Dimple in Wife are Mukherjee's female protagonists.

Anita Desai's novels are about the inner world of her characters; she has admirably delineated the mental trauma that her protagonists undergo. Like Shashi Deshpande, she may not be projecting any feminist ideas or taking any anti- male stand but unconsciously, in her honest and realistic depiction of the husband-wife relationship, she is mouthing concerns very close to feminism. She admitted it to one interviewer :

“I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or have been driven into some extremity of despair and turn against or make a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow against or make no demands; it costs no effort, but those who cannot follow it (....) know what the demands are, what it costs to meet them.”ⁱⁱ

Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* and Nanda Kaul and Raka in *Fire on the Mountain*, prove the truth of this statement. They fail to play the societal roles traditionally assigned to the Indian women. These are introspective and sensitive women protagonists, who live in a world of fantasy like Maya or flee to a Carignano like Nanda Kaul did.

In *Cry, The Peacock*, the protagonist, Maya undergoes great mental trauma born of her marriage to a much older, business minded Gautama. Owing to an over-sheltered past and father-fixation, she is hypersensitive while Gautama is insensitive towards her sensibilities and finally to get rid of him by killing him by pushing him off the roof. *Fire on the Mountain* is about the main protagonist Nanda Kaul, who retreats to Carignano after having fulfilled her duties to her family. Now, “she asked to be left to the pines and cicadas alone. She wanted no one and nothing else.”ⁱⁱⁱ Her great-granddaughter Raka just to recover from typhoid joins her. With a violent father and a suffering mother, she lives in a make-believe world of her own. Her grandmother Nanda Kaul is very surprised to find that she demands no attention, and is reticent and aloof. This makes Nanda Kaul to recall her past as a selfless wife and mother in her discharging of the traditional societal role of an Indian woman.

Anita Desai’s protagonists suffer acute mental trauma that stems from their alienation from their own self and the society. In a patriarchal society they find that they are failing to fulfill social expectations or play their traditionally prescribed roles.

The institution of marriage is one of the chief concerns of all the women writers and it has undergone a number of changes. The traditional concept of love and marriage as sacrament and sex as a taboo is losing its importance. The theory of slavery for women propounded by Manu has become the thing of past.

Deshpande, Desai and Mukherjee’s views on marriage is different from what most of the Western feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer and Kate Millet hold. In *The Second Sex* Simone De Beauvoir writes:

“It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true, but almost it annihilates woman.”^{iv}

Desai, Deshpande and Mukherjee are no exception. They portray maladjustment in marriage and the predicament of modern woman in the male dominated society. There is a basic difference in the nature of man and women that men are kept to be rational and matter of fact while women are emotional and sentimental. Naturally they look at things in different ways and react to the same situations differently. A woman has to adjust not only with the man but to family values and the society of changing values. The result is that there is a gradual erosion of marital relationship along with the override of everything that is cherished by a woman. Due to this type of pressures a woman’s sensibility is destroyed and her true self is crushed. The protagonists in the novels of Desai, Deshpande and Mukherjee are in constant search of their ‘true’ self. The novelists write about the upper-middle class.

All the marriages in Desai’s novels are more or less business transactions. A marriageable daughter is handed over to the male-partner without considering her mind and her feelings. She has to fulfill the responsibilities and demands of parents and society

Shashi Deshpande’s women also do not hold a very good opinion about marriage. In order to achieve their freedom, the protagonists in her novel seek marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. They play the role of a daughter and look forward to the role of a wife with the hope that this role will be helpful in getting their freedom. But marriage proves to be another trap for them.

Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists usually are the educated middle class working women who feel like caged animal within the institution of marriage. They feel that marriage obstructs their growth as individuals and see marriage in the terms of dark rooms where only terror awaits them.

Bharti Mukherjee's protagonists differ in their attitudes about marriage and marital relationships. For Dimple (Wife) her marriage is a total disappointment because she has romantic notions about marriage which are belied soon after her marriage. The discussion of female sexuality is still considered a taboo in Indian society despite the twenty first century of civilization. Generally female sexuality is concerned only with the function of reproduction. These novelists present interesting variations on this theme which range from rigid male disapproval of extra- marital sexual relationship to interiorization of the social mores because of which women are forced to guiltily suppress any spontaneous expression of their sexuality.

Desai dwells on the subject of sex with her poetic expansiveness. In *Cry, The Peacock* Maya's married life is marked by loneliness and she feels that sex has no meaning without proper understanding between husband and wife.

The late pregnancy's repercussions on grown up daughters have been subtly brought out by Anita Desai in her novel *Fasting Feasting* because it is very shocking for Uma and Aruna to accept the pregnancy of their mother.

Out of the three novelists, Deshpande and Mukherjee deal with the theme of extra- marital relationship, which is closely related to marriage. A startling idea that can be traced throughout Deshpande's novels is the emergence of a new class of Indian women are coming out of their conservative shells and are ready to accept and express the sexual realities of human life. Her women takes recourse in extra marital sex. Saru's affair with Boozie and Padmakar Rao seem to be temporary substitutes for her unfulfilled marital life. Jaya's affair with Kamat is only a little short of sexual relationship. Novelists protagonists have broken the social taboos.

These protagonists see their attractions objectively and do not allow themselves to be bogged down by any feeling of guilt. With Shashi Deshpande's protagonists it is the lack of any meaningful communication with their spouses leads to their developing such relationships but soon they realize the futility and absurdity of such relations. Such relations are short-lived and have no serious impact on their marriage.

On the other hand Desai's protagonists don't involve in any kind of extra- marital relationships. Despite their claustrophobic marital life, her protagonists never try to seek release in a relationship outside their marriage. Even Mukherjee's protagonists involve in extra- marital affairs.

With marital alienation and its consequences these novelists also highlight the misery of widows too who become victims of neglect or exploitation. The lives of Mira Masi, Jasmine's mother are all doomed because widowhood is considered as a bane. Jasmine's determination to leave India arises from her refusal to be confined to the life of a widow like her mother. Her life abroad with the Vadheras too highlights the behavior that is expected of an Indian widow.

These protagonists have no predilection for motherhood. They all evade performing the duties of a mother. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* loves her children but is least motherlike in her reluctance to be on the giving side and grows highly impatient even with the eating habits of the children. In *That Long Silence* Jaya's inability to communicate honestly with her children troubles her. Her son's sudden disappearance from a holiday trip and the subsequent reappearing at uncle's home fills her with an acute sense of failure. Despairingly Jaya relinquishes the halo of motherhood and realizes the ultimate result of her obsession with fulfilling all her roles as a woman at the cost of her own self-hood. Deshpande does not deny the warmth and genuine feelings of motherhood. Dimple (Wife) is disinclined to bearing a child for her own reasons. She considers the unborn child an "unfinished business" which could clutter up the preparations for going abroad.^v Hence she skips rope to induce an abortion. Some of these protagonists were greatly disappointed by their mother as they had failed to be ideal mothers. Saru articulates her dislike for her mother: "If you are women, I don't want to be one."^{vi} Even Jaya likes her father more than her mother. Maya didn't remember her mother. Nanda Kaul couldn't prove to be an ideal mother and Raka's mother was reduced to a pitiable condition by her violent husband. By seeing that motherhood had no glamour or thrill about it, these protagonists are not keen on playing the role of a mother.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists do not show any progress in terms of development of character. Sarita and Jaya face similar problems and achieve a similar self-realization. They withdraw from their families for a while; examine their circumstances objectively without any external advice and then they return to the home and family knowing full well as to what is to be expected of themselves and their respective partners.

Anita Desai's protagonists show a clear progress from Maya to Bim's self realization. Maya is dreamy and have misplaced expectations from her husband. Nanda Kaul realizes the truth about herself at very late stage that she had only been lying to herself as a wife and mother.

Bharti Mukherjee's protagonists are different from Desai's and Mukherjee's protagonists in most respects. Her protagonists are unlike each other socially, economically and temperamentally like Dimple in *Wife* is a middle-class ordinary looking girl while Jasmine in *Jasmine* is a rural girl with the courage and determination to face the world by her own. Maya too lacks the strength to face the situations when they crop up. It is only Jasmine who shows real strength to face crisis, overcome obstacles and the capacity to adapt her to the ever-changing conditions. She shows that strength and adaptability which we find missing in Mukherjee's other protagonists.

All the three novelists are against being dubbed as feminist writers. But they do present their own brand of feminism in very elusive ways. These novelists have presented a woman's world from a woman's point of view, which clearly shows their serious concern over women's issues. Deshpande admits :

"I am a woman and I do write about women, and I am going to say it loudly, I don't want to dissociate myself."^{vii}

All these protagonists have a realization of their problem and are not averse to confronting the problem. In attempting to find solutions, they choose different means and do not all succeed to the same extent. They struggle against the odds but do not resign themselves to them. They either escape like Maya and Dimple or overcome like Sarita or seek new horizons like Jasmine. While portraying their protagonists, these novelists display a contemporary, feminine sensibility.

Most of the protagonists - Saru, Jaya, Maya, Tara and Dimple have no sisters. No other female bonding is seen in any of the novels except Lilian Gordon's concern for the illegal immigrants in *Jasmine*. In all the novels it is often women who are portrayed as the worst enemies of women in their insistence on constant subservience to males or in maintaining the ritualistic seclusion of widows. It is significant that even women friends are few except - Maya speaks of visiting Pom and Dimple is always planning to write to Pixie and Nanda Kaul has a regular visitor of Ila Das. However, none of them are close enough to help each other. All of them are prototypes of the loneliness and the angst that is characteristic of many modern, urban, sensitive people, particularly women.

Deshpande and Mukherjee unveil the elusive process of gender discrimination operative in the Indian society where the female child is acculturated to her secondary position. Deshpande defines the girl child through the various factors that shape her like myths, legends and the environment. The lack of intimacy between mother and daughter in Deshpande's novels springs from the undeserving greatness bestowed on the son. It is the environment that decides the attitude of the child: her personality develops through upbringing and socialisation. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a victim of gender discrimination which ultimately leads to sibling jealousy and her involuntary involvement in the drowning of her brother, Dhruva. The guilty conscience engendered by the groundless accusation of the mother scalds her psyche. The constant reminder that they are mere occupiers in their homes breeds in them a sense of rootlessness. Yet these protagonists cannot completely sever from traditional upbringing. They become peaceful only after a reconciliation with the past. In Mukherjee, Dimple too is led to consider marriage as her sole rationalization.

Anita Desai also uses the past of her characters as a key to their unconsciousness. As daughters they, except Uma whose education is restricted for nursing the prized son, enjoy reasonable adolescence without feeling the discrimination of being girl children because of the absence of parental interference.

As each one of these novels has a woman protagonist holding centre-stage, the male characters are only on the periphery, and are seen only in relation to the protagonists and none of them are well developed characters.

In Bharti Mukherjee's novels, husbands play a less important role in the protagonists' lives, when compared to Deshpande's and Desai's novels.

A study of these three novelists reveals some interesting similarities and differences among their protagonists, male characters and the society they portray. We find that these novelists portray wide spectrum of contemporary Indian woman who are truly representative of the average urban Indian woman of today. These novelists have given a realistic representation of the consciousness of the protagonists. Each protagonist strives for an identity of her own, apart from the traditionally ordained straight jacketed roles of daughter, wife and mother. In spite of the common traits they have their own significant difference from the others.

Though Desai's protagonists dare to say 'no' to their traumatic existence but fail to find any solution to their problems. The earlier were not normal characters, as Desai admits and death is the only solution to their problems. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are stronger than Desai and Mukherjee's protagonists. They refuse to sacrifice their individuality for the sake of upholding the traditional role models laid down by society for women. But they try to resolve their problems by a process of temporary withdrawal.

After rejected traditional role models, Deshpande's protagonists shows great strength and courage in evolving their own role models as per the requirements of their social surroundings. As compare to Deshpande's protagonists, Desai's protagonists remain static, while Deshpande's protagonists display a tangible development during the progress of the novel. They go through a process of self-examination before they reach self-actualization. Thus Deshpande has been successful in creating strong women protagonists who refused to get crushed under the weight of their own tragedies and face life with great strength and courage. As compare to Desai's protagonists they appear to be more life-like and more akin to the educated, middle-class, urban Indian woman of today.

While Deshpande's protagonists move out of their home, Mukherjee's protagonists take one step that they move into an even wider world by leaving Indian shores for abroad. They try to build a home away from their real home but fail to break themselves free of the traditional Indian ideas and attitudes.

In the thirty years from the publication of Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* to the present, there has been a perceptible change in the ambitions of the Indian woman. Though the three novelists have never claimed to be feminists, their protagonists are manifestations of this gradual but steady change. From Desai's *Maya* to Deshpande's *Urmila* to Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, these protagonists demonstrate the changing facets of Indian womanhood. In all the novels each one faces a conflict between individual desires and societal-expectations. Even when incapable of changing accepted, traditional male-oriented norms and ideas, they reveal the strength to question them. These women are not willing to be tossed about by expectations of a male-oriented society. They reveal the strength to face these societal pressures due to their self-confidence and self-awareness.

In spite of the differences, the three novelists agree on the need for self-determination for each protagonist. These three novelists are truly representative of the growing number of Indian women writing fiction in English. They herald the changing scenario of novel writing with their in-depth depiction of the Indian psyche, specially seen in their depiction of the women protagonists.

Desai, Deshpande and Mukherjee portray the world of women of today. They create women characters who struggle hard against the social setup to acquire an identity and individuality of their own. All the three deal with middle class urban women, excepting one *Jasmine* of Mukherjee's *Jasmine* who originally belongs to rural Punjab. Deshpande's protagonists show a more realistic approach than the protagonists of Desai in the assessment of their position in society. *Saru*, *Jaya* and *Urmi* feel hemmed in by the social shackles, which bind them to traditional attitudes and expectations and yet they try to achieve independence within that framework. They are able to come to terms with themselves and the social around them by seeking

a real goal with the accepted codes of society. While Desai's protagonists fail to come to terms with the reality around them and either they commit suicide like Maya or live a isolated life like Nanda Kaul.

Though Desai, Deshpande and Mukherjee have disclaimed being feminists, the protagonists they portray are manifestations of a gradual change; these protagonists demonstrate the changing facets of Indian womanhood. Each faces a conflict between personal desires and societal expectations. Though they are not in a position to change the traditional male- oriented norms and codes but they all at least dare to question them and despite some differences, all the three novelists agree on the need of self determination for their protagonists. Their protagonists do get marginalized or perform their duties as per the notions and eccentricities of the male members in the family. They all seek their rightful place as human beings in society by refusing to be treated as doormat and they reject socially defined role models for them.

In spite of all the similarities, they make their protagonists function differently. Desai's protagonists seek a harmony that they cannot attain; Mukherjee's Jasmine alone is successful in creating her own harmony but Shashi Deshpande's greatness lies in the fact that her protagonists seek harmony within the traditional social setup.

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