

Identity Crisis in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai and Manju Kapur

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Abstract

Anita Desai as well as Manju Kapur seems to have been on the quest for order and meaning in life in their Indian English fiction writing. Their protagonists undergo a struggle to find their real self; because of the cramping pressures of anxieties, they seem to have lost it. They experience a disparity between the higher needs of the individual's inner nature and the unalterable cosmic conditions of existence. Those who are able to comprehend and surmount their personal problems seem to gain a healthy vision of life after some struggles. Desai remains primarily a novelist of moods, of persistent states of mind, of the psyche. Most of her novels are extended narratives of states of being which do not cohere into a plot or structure in the conventional sense, Desai sees the world in terms of experience as it emerges from the encounter of the self with the world outside. This intensity and density of texture compensates for the absence of a strong plot or story line in her fiction. Kapur has closely observed and portrayed the small human details of real relationships. The bewildering levels of communication and misunderstanding between the characters are depicted almost fondly, yet contrast strongly with the exhilarating freedom of being in a relationship where there is true intimacy.

This paper attempts to show how they achieve the results they seek to gain, in order to expose not only the extremity of the suffering endured by women, but also the deep psychological problems that beset many human beings.

Keywords: real self, conditions of existence, states of mind, psychological problems, real relationships.

Introduction

Fiction writing has reached the pinnacle of its glory with the writings of established women writers of fiction like Kamala Markandeya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Santha Rama Rao, Atia Hussain, Manju Kapur, and Kiran Desai.

The basic view is that our civilization is pervasively patriarchal, is male-centered and controlled and organized and conducted in such way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic. In the patriarchal view, women are taught in the process of being socialized and are encouraged to cooperate in their subordination. (Naik, M.K.)

Feminism in Fiction

Feminism being an important movement in the modern world, woman's place, position and especially the question of her identity are the major issues in India also.

In India, since ages, a woman's role in life was strictly compartmentalized; she was a daughter, a wife or a mother. In all these roles she had to adhere to certain appointed norms; she had no separate identity as a human being. Things are looking up nowadays, especially among the communities where women's education and material prosperity have ushered in a degree of enlightenment. In common with women all over the world, Indian woman is also voicing her desire to be emancipated, to get rid of the unjust restrictions imposed on her and the pervasive discriminations against her. She is seeking the right to be regarded as a whole human being, not simply as an adjunct to her male relatives. (Iyengar, Srinivasa)

Quest for Identity and Female-Assertiveness

Quest for identity and Female-Assertiveness in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English is a bifocal subject. It directs its gaze toward philosophy and psychology and looks towards social science and literature.

The very expression 'Quest for Identity' has become a fashionable term in literary and other studies. Day-in and day-out, the newspapers report on several sections of society resort to the expression 'search for identity'. Their stories tell us about 'national identity', 'regional

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G. Smitha, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.

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identity', 'tribal identity', 'cultural identity', 'man's identity', 'women's identity', 'Indian identity', 'European identity', 'group identity' and hoards of other identities. One has no idea how many identities are at present floating in the air. It is very difficult to have a count of them, to catch them, and to comprehend them.

Female and Male Identities

Psychologists affirm that female identity varies in many ways from the male identity. Therefore, women alone can convey their experience honestly and authentically. Again, in the changed circumstances of today, she would be the fittest medium to tell the world about her feeling of hurt, and about her sense of suffering.

Anita Desai's Works and Characters

Anita Desai's treatment of the themes of alienation, maladjustment, isolation, the absurdity of human existence, the quest for ultimate meaning, and time as fourth dimension, have an existential learning. In one of her interviews, she admits to having been influenced consciously by Proust, Dostovesky, Lawrence, Checkov and Kawabata. Like some of the above writers, her works are also a quest for order and meaning in life. Her protagonists undergo a struggle to find their real self, which they had lost, because of the pressures of anxieties. They experience a disparity between the higher needs of the individual's inner nature and the unalterable cosmic condition of existence.

Desai's self-alienated personages are often entangled in personal problems and cannot feel existential angst, because they are gripped by neurotic anxiety. Hence such characters lose their real self, forgo human values and create irredeemable conditions for themselves.

These characters strive to find a 'substitute' for their lost self. Each wants to guard his identity so that he remains meaningful to himself and is able to see himself as someone significant. The imperative urge of each one is to 'lift himself above others', to guard himself from the hostile and desperate atmosphere perpetuated by a detrimental childhood climate. Maya sees herself as a "doll" to be pampered by all, Monisha glorifies her self-image as an intellectual, superior class other women of Jiban's family. These two characters, ensnared in their delusions

of glory, pass through severe alienation and end up with their abnormal self-destructive behavior. (Iyengar, Srinivasa)

Self-expression and Self-Actualization

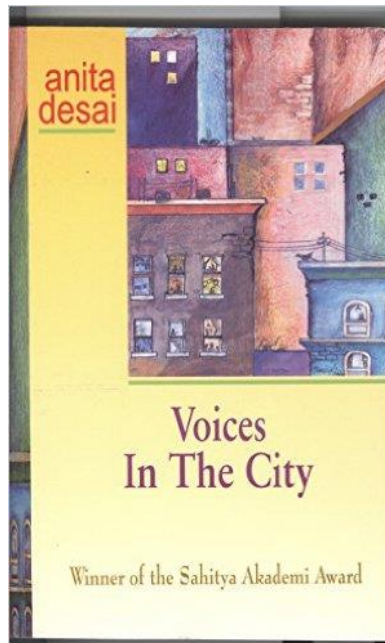
In Anita Desai the urge for self-expression is in itself a powerful drive towards self-actualization.

Her central characters are continually engaged in a quest. Her characters like Monisha, Amla and Nirode are free spirits, who dissatisfied with the routine of ordinary happenings of the world, break away from their existing life patterns, only to realize that family and social ties cannot be so easily substituted. The apparently stoic Nirode, seeks some kind of fulfillment in their lonely existence, is drawn to their lonely environment again and again. For some of Desai's characters the realization comes sooner or later and that individual's freedom must create some kind of new relationship out of the mundane day-to-day happenings.

Aiming at Harmony between Inner and Outer Selves

Anita Desai creates a world in which the inner and the outer selves aspire for harmony. She is an analyst of the human mind, a creator of brilliant characters, and an astute interpreter of life. She presents a gallery of vivid and realistic portraits. The motivational system of her characters works in the peculiar manner, suited to their environment and their basic needs. The characters are caught in the web of their own compulsions. One begins to realize that their ambitions, disappointments and loneliness are real. The psychological intricacies of the behavior of her protagonists, their struggles to find meaning in their lives, symbolize the concern of modern man with the eternal human situation, which speaks of the changed perspective of writers in depicting characters. (Jain, Jasbir)

Voices in the City



In her *Voices in the city*, the majority of her characters - Maya, Monisha, Nirode, Raka, Nanda - live lives in illusion by retreating into fabrication and fantasy, or show their reluctance to face reality; they live in self-imposed solitary confinement. Then, there are characters who compromise with life - Sita, Sarah, Amla, Bim and Devan. Although they have their conflicts, they manage to transcend their personal problem. Amla suffers existential crisis, but soon decides that she will not allow herself to be lost like her sister. This affirmation is spontaneous. Bim accepts her present, and linking it with her past, marches ahead towards a bright future. In Sita and Bim, there is, at least, a resolution to affirm life. The growing urge for self-discovery in Desai's characters thus exhibits the growth potential of her protagonists, as also the ever-developing vision of their creator. Her primary occupation in all her works is not how one gets along with others, but with oneself.

Nirode had no sense of real self. He is losing contact with reality. All his efforts are diverted towards his identity. In Nirode's character, Anita Desai shows her prowess for a powerful dramatization of human isolation. Dissatisfied with his family and society, Nirode seeks solace in his self-conceived world of imagination. In Nirode's case, his real self, the "I" is not encumbered: it is shunted out by his super-ego, which is his glorified self-image. Consequently, he cannot arrive at a correct self-definition. He is certain that one can retain one's sanity by being secretive and closing oneself off to all communication. To Monisha he exhorts,

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G. Smitha, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.

Identity Crisis in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai and Manju Kapur

“Never tell them your secrets” (Desai, Anita. p.132). Communion appears to him painful and humiliating as to Monisha. “I made myself inferior to all these frauds by making an attempt to make them read anything I’d written. Anything that is of any value to oneself to be kept great secret,” (Desai, Anita. 135).

Withdrawal is an important solution Nirode adopts, to counter the difficulties generated by his “ontological insecurities”. In the first few pages of the novel one learns that he has opted for a life of “shadows, silence and stillness” (Desai, Anita. 8). This is a defense mechanism to guard his idealized self image as a self-sufficient and independent individual. Nirode creates for himself a dead silence. It does not vibrate with the voice of the spirit. It is not a sign of normal withdrawal, but a neurotic compulsion.

A Quest for Order

Desai’s work is also a quest for order and meaning in life. Her protagonists undergo a struggle to find their real self and because of the cramping pressures of anxieties, they had lost it. They experience a disparity between the higher needs of the individual’s inner nature and the unalterable cosmic conditions of existence. Their personal and historical problems play a significant role in exaggerating their existential troubles and in perpetuating their neurosis. Those who are able to comprehend and surmount their personal difficulties seem to gain a healthy vision of life. (Kumar, Ashok).

A Novelist of Moods

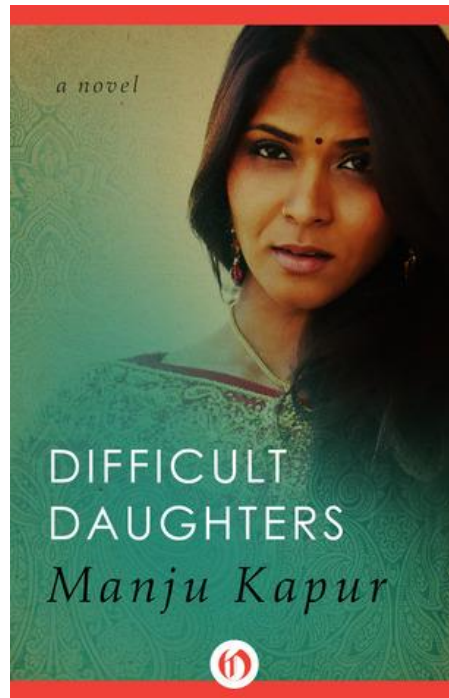
Anita Desai remains primarily a novelist of moods, of persistent states of mind, of the psyche. Most of her novels are extended narratives of states of being which do not cohere into a plot or structure in the conventional sense, Desai sees the world in terms of experience as it emerges from the encounter of the self with the world outside. Anita Desai dwells on the variety and complexity of this limited world with the sensitivity and imagination of a poet. She observes every sight and sound with an intensity that not only damages but also baffles the readers. This intensity and density of texture compensates for the absence of a strong plot or story line in her fiction. (Iyengar, Srinivasa)

Manju Kapur and the Theme of Marriage

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G. Smitha, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.

Identity Crisis in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai and Manju Kapur



The theme of marriage was emphasized by Manju Kapur in her *Difficult Daughters* through heroine Virmati who considered marriage as the journey's end. Viewed from this point of view *Difficult Daughters* is an innocuous human document. It is a cry for freedom. The very title of the book is assertive. By placing the adjective 'difficult', before daughters, the author sends a signal that the characters in the novel are not soft and pliable. They are not likely to yield to pressures - familial and social and are sure to carve out the unconventional course that meets their aspirations. They are for making daring choices in the unkind world.

Acts of Assertion

An incident that eloquently tells us about Virmati's assertive nature is her squatting on the floor in a class of four hundred boys and six girls, with a 'damn the world' attitude. This gesture rings alarm bells in many hearts, and the bold step turns the fictional world upside down. Her anger and assertiveness, ranging from small to big size, may be seen in the tart replies she gives to Kasturi.

"What is wrong with not wanting to marry?"

"Tell him I don't want to marry?" (Kapur, Manju. 54)

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G. Smitha, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.

Identity Crisis in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai and Manju Kapur

Further, her leap into the swirling waters of a river, her pre-marital sex and other episodes may be seen as acts of assertiveness, of defiance. After all, defiance is the first step of asserting one's personality. This takes us back to the question of identity: "Which forces change your identity?" The only answer we get is, "What you identify yourself with" (Kapur, Manju)

Changing Identity

Virmati's identity begins to change as she identifies herself with Shakuntala and with Lahore. This identification gradually creates in her a desire to be free. And to fulfill that desire she demolishes whatever comes in her way. She thus constructs her new identity.

The story begins with Ida's intense desire to align herself with her mother's past, as she journeys backwards in time after her mother's funeral. She then relives through the pages of her book, the intense battles of her mother as a daughter, rebelling against her convention bound family and seeking fulfillment of her passionate love affair. (Kapur, Manju)

Against Tradition

The theme of *Difficult Daughters* is the struggle of a woman against tradition, which continues even today. Those who swim with the tide are comfortable, and those who dare to strike against convention have a painful strife on their hands. But it is the latter who form the core of such books and not the former, whose comfortable lives go unsung.

Virmati is a daughter born into a huge household where women are supposed to marry, breed and cater to the food-fixated Punjabi patriarchs. The description of a typical Punjabi household is perfect; even today certain families live the same way. She has managed to capture the flavor of Punjabi life by using the typical terms "bhraji", "pehnji", "acchar murabe" (Kapur, Manju) and so on.

Transcending Times

The author goes forwards and backwards, as she transcends the time barrier; she begins with the present, she traces her mother's story, punctuated with the event of her grandmother's life to provide contrast. Of course, the core of the book remains Virmati's conflicts in a

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politically surcharged and convention-ridden society. She concludes with the emergence of Virmati's daughter Ida. Her mother fought to give legitimacy to her love through marriage inspite of family opposition.

Ida succeeds in breaking out of an unsuccessful marriage and staying single, a phenomenon unheard of in her grandmother Kasturi's time. The focus of the writer is on the world of woman, but she also points out that men too were in traditional fetters. Like the Oxford educated Professor, bound in a loveless marriage to an uneducated woman.

An Eye for Detail

The author's style is absorbing; she has an eye for detail, particularly, that all too familiar life style of Punjab. Through the novel *Difficult Daughters*, the social and political milieu of the period emerges very powerfully, as it blends smoothly with the emotional fabric. Strangely, there is a paucity of social history in English of this period, in contrast to the abundance of political history.

Difficult Daughters must be read by the Lahore fixation for a return journey to an era, which will fade away as the pre-partition generation, the primary source of that oral history, gradually dwindles. The recent spurt of books, some of which offer an interesting blend of fact and fiction, would add to the genre of social history.

Kapur has closely observed and portrayed the small human details of real relationships. The bewildering levels of communication and misunderstanding between the characters are depicted almost fondly, yet contrast strongly with the exhilarating freedom of being in a relationship where there is true intimacy.

Inner Subtlety of Woman's Mind

In depicting the inner subtlety of a woman's mind, Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female psyche. Most of all, Kapur manages to lend the personal touch with the external. She speaks as someone who has lived through the unrest of the communal riots, which in some way or the other affected the lives of all Indians. These communal riots were a major historical event and Kapur has entwined them with simplicity and understanding into the

lives of Astha and Pipeelika. She shows an India which is relevant both to those who stayed on in their country to face the aggression of Western influences and heightened competition, and those who opted to view the country from Western climes.

Difficult Daughters and Voices in the City

In both novels, *Difficult Daughters* and *Voices in the City*, the authors reveal the response of the heroines subjected to uncaring and willfully negligent attitude of their family members to look beyond vistas immediately available. They strive for their liberty and equality with their counter parts, undergoing immense difficulties and gain them at the end.

Personal history of the protagonist is linked with the social and national history. In *Difficult Daughters* the turmoil on the political front corresponds with the turmoil in the lives of the individuals. Virmati does not put questions to herself and she does not evolve as an individual. Virmati's humble and heroic suffering, in order to secure her love and marriage with the professor, who is already married to Ganga and has a child, stands as a symbol of her assertiveness and the idea of the emancipated woman, who is destined to carve out a niche for herself.

Some of Kapur's characters are vitally alive. In the process of individuation they have self strength and a tendency to emerge out of their isolation, insecurity and anxiety and gain a kind of closeness and solidarity. The basic problem she points to, is how is one to mix in society, and yet maintain one's individuality. A profound feeling of sympathy springs from her art of creating human beings caught in the terror of facing existence with all its sickening reality.

The growing urge for self-discovery in Manju Kapur's characters thus exhibits the growth potential of her protagonists as also the ever developing vision of their character. Virmati's total negation of self in her efforts to merge with her husband's family is more in keeping with the traditional notion of adjustment. She adheres to the age-old advice, which her mother also gave her, as to never argue with the elders, respect them and do as they wish. If Virmati has carved for herself a space, it is as a daughter and as a second wife. Manju Kapur explores the loneliness of human psyche in Virmati and Ida, where all life as seen as one vast abyss.

Manju Kapur and Anita Desai

Surely, “neat, nice and funny” are not the right adjectives to define the happenings in the *Difficult Daughters*. Manju Kapur talks about the same title in her other novel, set in Amristar around the time of partition. Kapur’s novel is a singularly impressive fiction, different from Desai’s even though it deals with another very Indian theme, marriage. Yet, this most used and abused subject of Indian fiction is treated by Manju Kapur in quite an unusual way and with very few concessions to the typical models both of Indian and European female narrative.

Actually the opening of the novel - ‘The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother’- might remind the reader of Jane Austen in its tone and of Shashi Deshpande in its theme. On the contrary, once the narrator has pronounced this terrible matter of fact statement, the story she tells, takes a different turn both from Austen’s middle class irony, and Deshpande’s feminine doubts and problems. Ida, who tells the story, tries to show that she has better reasons than the universal female identity crisis for not wishing to be similar to her mother.

However, telling the long tale of her mother’s strife to be a free individual, in spite of all the rules and impositions of the Indian tradition, Ida manages only to achieve a sort of final sympathy for her rebellious mother. Actually, Virmati, who is never painted as a heroine, reaches many goals. As usual, Virmati was refused the freedom like all Indian girls in the colonial times, and never did she get that freedom she longed for so badly. The story of Virmati is not only the story of a *Difficult Daughter*, but also of a stubborn student, a hopeless lover, an unwanted daughter-in-law, a despised second wife, a rejected mother, in a word, an outsider to the end of her days.

Written in a brisk style, with no concessions to watercolor descriptions and self-complacent musings, *Difficult Daughters* shows, nevertheless, some naiveties typical of a first novel. Kapur has some problems with points of views (Ida, who should be the narrator, is no more than a shadow, whose voice is very often forgotten by her author). (Kapur, Manju)

Kapur’s novel leaves a positive impression. It is a book that makes the reader reflect about family, marriage, love and the commitments they involve. But most of all, it is a story about the difficulty of being a daughter - and the mistakes daughters commit in order to live

lives different from their mothers. This is an experience all women share; and so this novel is not interesting to read, nor is it as easy as Desai's. But it stays in the reader's heart for a much longer time, as it effectively speaks on the theme of Quest for Identity.

Desai's women, live in a world where harmony is aspired to but never arrived at. Total alienation is Monisha's dharma; it is in self realization and when that seems unattainable or when the Quest for meaning in life fails, she chooses between "death and mean existence"- suicide with a more existential approach to life. Desai's protagonists choose extinction when existence ceases to have meaning.

To Sum Up

To sum up, the quest for identity as a theme clearly manifests in the novels of Manju Kapur and Anita Desai. For the achievement of a fully satisfying, mature, intelligent, happy and progressive personality, this quest is to be met with success. Otherwise one shall have an emotionally and intellectuality dwarfed personality which will be greatly lacking in all inner joy and peace, and real interest in experiencing the varied charms and beauties that life offers.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

G. Smitha, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.

Identity Crisis in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai and Manju Kapur

332