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Voice of Agony: A Study of the Novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract

With the woman on the margin and at the receiving end to bear the brunt of society and its ills of difficult and dangerous relationships, the novels by Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande give a fascinating account of grim reality that the disadvantaged, the affected and the oppressed feel compelled to suffer. In her novels, Anita Desai vigorously explores the theme of rootlessness, alienation, anxiety, domestic disharmony, interpersonal relationships and patriarchal dominance in traditional Indian families. With her tremendous dexterity and proven skills, she charts a new territory for switching her focus from the external to the internal psychic reality. She succeeds in delving deep into protagonists' mental struggle resulting in their severe

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stress and strain. In the wake of her efforts to carry out characters' psychological analysis, most of her protagonists make constant endeavour to define their relations to themselves vis-à-vis human relationships with others, taking into account the mental dilemma and innermost psyche of emotional troubles. On the other hand, Shashi Deshpande holds the mirror up to the Indian middle class life without any exaggeration, deliberately oblivious of the western audience and critics, or commercial success. She deals in rigorous detail in her novels with human relationships, its bondage, the emotional roller coaster and the struggles and ways to overcome them. Unlike Desai, Deshpande focuses, in particular, on middle class women, peculiar Indian house wives and career-oriented women. More often than not, the novels of Deshpande center around typical Indian joint families, importance of relationships in a family and marriage, and also detached or dysfunctional family relationships. She not only gives descriptions of urban middle class family, but also analyses in depth those families that grapple with poverty, struggle for existence, and hardly manage to lead a normal life. However, both of them paint the bleak picture of the Indian woman, which serves as a timely reminder to those at the helm, to respond to the concerned voice of agony.

Anita Desai and Her Works

Anita Desai, one of the major stalwarts among Indian English novelists, was born of a Bengali father, D. N. Mazumdar, a businessman and a German mother, Toni Nime in Mussori on June 24, 1937. As a prolific and promising figure in novel writing, she has carved out a niche for herself in Indian English Literature. From childhood, she showed her creative talent. At the age of seven, she struck a literary spark of creative writing, and published her first story as a small piece of art in a children's magazine at nine. The feminine voices of the desolate Indian women find their echo in her writings. She, nominated three times for Man Booker Prize, has been considered to be one of the most brilliant novelists in Indian English Literature since 1960s.

Anita Desai had her schooling at Queen Mary's secondary school and a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Delhi University in 1957. Then she got married to Ashwin Desai, a man with a booming business. A mother of four children, she went ahead with her writing spree, producing novels of remarkable merit, almost as if in a sequence. The stupendous

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achievements in her writings earned her many accolades. A Visiting Fellow at Colleges like Smith, Mount Holyoke, Girton College and Cambridge University in 1986, she became a member of the advisory board for English for the National Academy of Letters in Delhi, known as The Sahitya Akademi which awarded Desai its top Prize in 1979. She added new feathers in her cap from time to time. Being appointed as first Professor of Writing in English for more than twenty years by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, becoming Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, being designated as a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, being nominated for the prestigious Booker Prize for three times and being honored with the 'Padma Shri' award by India, are some of the incredible honors that she can really be proud of.

As against such milestones, she had some hard times in the 1960s when she started her career as a novelist with no room of her own, nor any publishers at her side to bring out her works. The creative works which create a distinct space for her are *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *The Village By The Sea* (1982), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1987), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), *The Zigzag Way* (2004), and *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011).

Desai as a Champion of Women's Sensibility

With an intensive study of Anita Desai's works, one can see that she mounts a fierce onslaught against patriarchal cultural pattern and the arrogance of the privileged dominant masculine gender, advocating ferociously for female autonomy at the same time. In her novels, she vigorously explores the theme of rootlessness, alienation, anxiety, domestic disharmony, interpersonal relationships and patriarchal dominance in traditional Indian families. With her tremendous dexterity and proven skill, she charts a new territory for switching her focus from the external to the internal psychic reality of her characters. She succeeds in delving deep into the protagonists' mental struggle resulting in severe stress and strain.

Dr. Swain mentions, “Critics like Solanki and Sharma have often observed that Desai’s protagonist is a psychologically fragmented individual who relies chiefly on indirect methods of coping with stress situations which ventilate through various survival strategies. Escape, withdrawal and denial of reality seem to be prominent primitive survival strategies among Desai’s protagonists.” (Images of Alienation. 170)

Like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Anita Desai makes a foray into human nature and human relationship from a psychological stand point. Earlier women novelists, including Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Jhabwala and Nayantara Sahagal never touched on the psychic issues of trials and tribulations of contemporary women as done by Desai. Representing ‘the creative release of feminine sensibility’, Desai’s women are mostly from the affluent class, not ordinary, nor on the bread line.

In an attempt to reveal the struggle of the soul and inner self, Desai has recourse to the same technique as used in the works of Marcel Proust, Dorothy Richardson, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. Desai deals with inner disturbance, contradictions, predicaments and the forces of antagonism constantly at work in the imaginative sensibility of woman. These techniques are suited to deal with thoughts, emotions and sensations at various levels of consciousness.

The stream of consciousness technique and flashback methodology have been extensively used in her novels, which very few novelists employed at the time. “Desai’s novels can be analyzed taking into consideration the psychological motivations of her novels as psychic drama through flashback, diary-entries, self-analysis, ruminations, rumbling of dialogues and descriptions of places and people.” (V. Singh 247)

Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar also observes:

“Since her pre-occupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness”

In her debut novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, she clears the ground for psychological explorations in Indian English novels. *Cry, The Peacock* focuses on the psychological trauma of Maya who is haunted constantly by the creeping fear of death, as was the prophesy of the albino astrologer. As though to overcome it, she loves Goutama, her husband, passionately and expects the same in return. But, the rationalistic approach of her husband puts a damper on her spirit and on the whole flirts dangerously with her life.

Voices in the City, the second novel, deals with the theme of social alienation, and alienation and estrangement in the relationship of husband and wife. Having no mutual liking, the couple harbours animosity towards each other for no apparent reason.

“When he came to Kalimpong and saw her wandering about her garden, touching her flowers, he never followed her. He used to lie back against his cushions, idle and contended - contended I think, in his malice.” (*Voices in the City* 207)

Desai's third novel, *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* makes a comprehensive analysis of immigrant lives in England, marked by the fluid identity of rootlessness or the in-between condition.

Desai tries to look into the root cause of a failing marriage. According to her, marriage reaches its bitter end on account of incompatible union - men are more rational and women more emotional and sentimental - and the shattering of the rainbow dream of a woman's blissful, happy married life.

“The hypocrisy of the institution of marriage is increasingly taking the shape of a dead albatross around the necks of the modern, emancipated, self-respecting women.” (Bannerjee123).

It is a business transaction rather than an institution.

Nanda Kaul, the protagonist of the novel, *Fire on the Mountain* stands for the trauma and agonizing experience of an Indian house wife, which in turn leaves her inner stability in shambles. She bears with her husband just for the sake of obligations; otherwise, she is starkly aware of the reality: “Not that her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen - he had only done enough to keep her quiet, while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress whom he had not married, because she was a Christian, but whom he had loved all his life.” (*Fire on the Mountain* 145)

In the wake of her efforts to carry out characters’ psychological analysis, most of her protagonists constantly endeavour to define their relations to themselves. She deals with human relationships, taking into account the mental dilemma and innermost psyche of the characters’ emotional troubles. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai immaculately formulates the delicate dynamics of the human relationships of three women, in an intricate narrative structure. In the words of Dr. Atma Ram, “Whereas a man is concerned with action, experience and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation”

Desai discussed at length the furies of women, and articulated the feminine voice for emancipation and empowerment. B. Ramachandra Rao is justified to say: “Each novel of Mrs. Desai is a masterpiece of technical skill”, (62) so as to express the angst and animosity of women. Her characterization is as equally important as plot construction. Prof. K.R S. Iyengar calls her work “original tales” and admires her skills in both inventing and narrating the stories.

Clear Light of the Day deals with the life of two sisters Bimla and Tara from a loveless home. Bimla’s Hobson’s choice to look after her mentally retarded younger brother, after her parents’ death, gives a clear insight into the maze of worries and sufferings a woman with such a responsibility has to undergo. It is also replete with maladjustments in relationships leading to

loveless marriages. The marriage of Tara and Bakul is an advantageous marriage, but not the best kind of marriage.

Desai lends new vision and value to the Indian novel by subjecting her characters to rigorous self-analysis and self-introspection, in order to redefine and re-discover themselves. The young men very often are up in arms against valued systems represented by traditions and customs and their own families, while the women are susceptible to spiritual struggles of being at constant war with themselves.

Where shall we go this Summer? echoes the feminine sensibility by probing the inner psyche of Sita, the central character. Aggressive and non-compromising, Sita is married to Raman. The maladjustment between Raman and Sita, the emptiness of the marriage, and Sita's state of neurosis is due to the bitter monotony of her daily life and lack of her active involvement. "Life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around, muddling and confusing, leading nowhere". (*Where shall we . . .*: 155) Besides, the relationship takes a hit as a consequence of her aggression and fiery temper as 'her fire had turned on him and even on the children, he felt her spite and ill temper. (*Where shall we . . .*135) "Anita Desai not only explores and portrays the feminine psyche of a common woman, but also of the subnormal bordering on abnormal women. These are the women who because of various factors are under so much of mental stress that they cannot be called insane, but then certainly they are not. She is unable to face the ordinary realities". (Gopal 5)

Reminiscent of Rama and Sita in *The Ramayana*, Sita and Raman are ironical names. Desai faithfully represents the modern Indian woman who strenuously objects to oppressive traditions and the conventional mode of life.

Through visual details and impressionistic style, she manages to give utterance to varied layers of underlying meaning in everyday behavior and objects.

The relationship of man and woman is a recurring subject in the novels of 1980s. Suffering utter isolation, the women were deeply involved in a wistful longing for love and communion which they imagine to be ‘the panacea for the ills of the world.’ However, the intense suffering is due to their failure to have emotional contact and investment, or failing in their attempts to elicit response, or understanding from the spouses,, or escape from the hostile atmosphere.

Even as an extensive study of Indian upper middle-class culture, *Fasting Feasting* sketches the life in an Indian family consisting of the parents, their children Uma, Aruna and Arun. With its focus on Uma’s claustrophobic feminine existentialism and humiliation, after futile attempts to set up an arranged marriage for her, the novel has a heart-breaking plot. Being at the beck and call of her parents, Uma, unmarried, unappreciated and treated as a domestic drudge, is always on the move, to sacrifice herself for her brother and for her home, admitting that she sometimes thinks of breaking off the shackles of responsibility.

Desai never loses sight of a person who suffers, because of the un-fulfillment of his/her mission in life. *In Custody* recounts the harrowing experience of Deven, a Hindi lecturer who has to receive a catalogue of failures; his wife is disgruntled about him, the students have scant regard for him and everyone around him takes undue advantage of him.

Unlike other works, *The Zigzag Way* sets a different tone with its setting in Mexico in a dramatic departure from her familiar ground. Anita Desai tracks and presents a graphic representation of the man-woman relationship in a miner’s family.

The examination of solitude and human frailties is the focal point in her latest work *The Artist of Disappearance*. The thematic aspect of this is that “new book are decay and disappointment, retreat and regret, so that choice seems highly appropriate” (Rohter). This is a “new volume, a trio of linked novellas about the art world, is also a sequence of underground detonations, culminating in a physical explosion that tears apart a mountain – and at a stroke

demolishes the 21st-century's corrupt linkage between art and celebrity". (Gee) It has the apocalyptic vision of Fire on the Mountain.

Desai plunges headlong into her characters' psyche to depict the roller coaster of emotions and inner struggles, triggered out of loneliness, alienation, pessimism and mental desolation. And with her three novels in the 70s, she was phenomenal. Meenakshi Mukherjee sums up Desai's position among the Indian woman novelists in the following words:

Another Indo-Anglian novelist whose distinctive style and intensely individual imagery deserves mention is Anita Desai. She is a comparatively young writer who has written only three novels so far, but already her style shows a strong individuality. Her language is marked by three characteristics: sensuous richness, a high-strung sensitiveness, and a love for the sound of words. (Mukherjee 179) With the passage of time, her spectacular writings won her tremendous laurels.

M. K. Naik appreciates Desai's contributions in these words:

Anita Desai unravels the tortuous involutions of sensibility with subtlety and finesse; and her ability to evoke the changing aspects of Nature matched with human moods is another of her assets, though her easy mastery of the language and her penchant for image and symbol, occasionally result in preciously and overwriting. If her fiction is able to advance from the vision of 'aloneness' as a psychological state of mind, that of alienation as a metaphysical enigma - as one hopes it will - Anita Desai may one day achieve an amplified pattern of significant exploration of consciousness comparable to Virginia Woolf at her best (Naik 254).

Desai's portrayal of young women with their predicaments marks a new era in Indian English Literature. Naik is apt to draw a parallel between Desai and Woolf. Her exceptional talent, though, lies in detailed sketches of her characters' mental agony owing to marital discord,

and their firm resolve, which very often failed, to seek better partners so as to fulfill their heart's desire.

Shashi Deshpande and Her Works

Among the contemporary novelists, Shashi Deshpande enjoys enormous popularity with an influential role in women's writings. She wins considerable amount of fame in short story and children's writings as well. Born to a Kannada writer and Sanskrit scholar, Adya Rangchar in 1938, she is an avid reader. Her father wrote plays of ideas and was known as Bernard Shaw of Kannada Theatre. She had her graduation in Economics from Elphinstone College, Mumbai and earned a degree of law from the Government Law College, Bangalore. In addition, she completed her Masters in English from Mysore University and did a course of journalism from Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai that paved the way for her prolific writing. As a widely-read person, she did not like to identify herself with any specific group either from India or abroad, she ushered in an era of peculiar woman's writings in her fictional debut in the 1970s. Deshpande has eleven novels, six collections of stories, four books for children and a screen play to her credit. This gives a clear indication of her significant contribution to the contemporary women's writing in India.

After the birth of her two sons, she made her literary debut with a collection of short stories, *The Legacy* in 1978. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, published in 1980 was her first attempt in novel writing. After a novella in between, she brought out her second novel *Roots and Shadows* in 1983. It won her the prize of Thirumathi Rangammal for the best Indian novel of 1982-83. In 1988, *That Long Silence*, a remarkable novel achieving a milestone, was published. It bagged for Deshpande the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award (National Academy of Letters) in 1990, accounting for its translation into a number of languages including German, Russian, Dutch and Danish. For her outstanding contribution to Indian writing in English, she won Padma Shri award in 2009. Her other novels are *The Binding Vine* (1993), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1993), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *The Stone Women* (2000), *In the Country of Deceit* (2008), and *Shadow Play* (2013). *The Nightingale and Intrusion and Other Stories* was published in the year 1993. Her novels are also included in the literary curriculum in

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foreign universities. She says “There are three things in my early life that have shaped me as a writer. These are: that my father was a writer, that I was educated exclusively in English and that I was born a female.” (Of Concern, Of Anxieties 107)

Women ‘s Angst and Anguish in Deshpande’s Novels

Deshpande holds the mirror up to the Indian middle class life. She paints a true picture of the ordinary middle class without any exaggeration, deliberately oblivious of the western audiences and critics, or commercial success. In sharp opposition to her contemporaries who present woman from their perspective, based on their interests, she deals in minute detail in her novels with human relationships, its bondage, emotional roller-coasters, struggles and ways to overcome them.

Nayantara Sahgal, Shobhaa De and Namita Gokhale lay their thrust on upper class society which is modern in outlook and fashionable in taste. The woman characters, projected by these novelists do not believe in traditional values, nor do they respect morality and social norms. With their unorthodox views and attitude, they are a rebel group, advocating and enjoying extramarital relationship or premarital sex, paying no heed to the repercussions, however dangerous. Anita Desai, in her novels discusses at length the relationship between husband and wife who can hold sway over the other characters. Be that as it may, Deshpande focuses, in particular, on middle class women, peculiar Indian house wives and career oriented women. More often than not, the novels of Deshpande center on typical Indian joint families, showing the importance of relationship in a family and marriage, and also depicting detached or dysfunctional family relationships. She not only gives descriptions of the urban middle class family, but also analyses in depth those families that grapple with poverty, struggle for existence, and hardly manage to lead a life. The norms of respectability and sophistication are a new coinage in the dictionary of their life. She also examines the mental instability of educated women who rely heavily on their husbands, or the male counterparts to make choices and take decisions.

Deshpande's novels deal in fastidious detail with the social milieu and cultural matrix of varied complex relationships. In her novels, the young and the old get entangled in the world of transition followed by new moorings and guidelines. The young are in the process of redefining and rediscovering their role and relationships with the multiple social systems. B. Kar and U. Kaushal say, "Her novels are mainly introspective, and individual's quest for a personal meaning in life becomes the crux of her works. She also explores the anguish and conflicts of modern educated Indian women who are caught between tradition and modernity but constructively try to attain their individualistic desires in life." (Kar and Kaushal 53)

Jane Austen exercised profound influence on Deshpande, when it comes to the treatment of family crisis and its impact on the younger generation. The impact of modernization in the last decades has triggered new changes in the social systems. Marriage underwent a sea change amounting to various upheavals in women's marital status. The adversity, frustration, bitterness, subjugation and disgust, experienced by woman, became the central theme in Deshpande's work. The human relationships between human beings as brother and sister, mother and daughter, father and daughter and above all between husband and wife have been presented by her with great ingenuity. In the words of Renganathan, "The underlying theme in Shashi Deshpande's novels is human relationships, especially the ones that exist between father and daughter, husband and wife and also between mother and daughter" (Renganathan 72).

Deshpande sheds light on the loss and loneliness, defeat and despair of a young woman due to her marriage going on the rocks. Her protagonists are educated young women. Despite their education and good upbringing, the women suffer at the hands of their husbands, who represent the norms of the male dominated society and shackles of traditional orthodoxy. In the words of Y.S. Sunita Reddy, "She gives us a peep into the state and condition of the present day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism." (Reddy 146)

Most of her central characters, Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terror*, and Jaya and Devyani are caught on the horns of a dilemma. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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analyses the struggle of a woman who suffers the bitterness of a family that shows greater preference to the male child. Saru, the protagonist goes through horrendous experience of blatant gender discrimination in her family that drives 'her into a schizophrenic state of mind'(Singh 391). She had been constantly paying a heavy price for her brother's untimely death, listening to her mother's words "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he dead?" (19)

If I Die Today and *Come Up Be Dead* deal with the social issues of women's education, economic independence and motherhood. In *If I Die Today*, a short story turned novel, Manju, in spite of her honesty and straightforwardness, falls into disarray, once her married life is fraught with the danger of silence and misunderstandings that raise her eyebrows at the institution of marriage with 'fear and anxiety gnawing at her heart'(Swain 42). She thinks,

"A marriage you start off expecting so many things. And bit-by-bit like dead leaves, the expectations fall off. But the two people who have shut themselves off in two separate glass jars who can see each other but can't communicate? Is this marriage?" (*If I Die Today* 24)

Roots and Shadows pictures Indu lying on the horns of dilemma between family and profession and between traditions and freedom of expressions. In a bid to play the roles of a true daughter, wife and mother, she fails to achieve her complete individual self. Besides, her marriage with Jayant curtails her freedom, her self-identity is at stake, and her individuality is put in serious jeopardy. She admits, "Once when I left home as a young girl, and the second time, when, once again I left the family and returned to Jayant. Both times I found out how wrong I was. New bonds replace the old; that is all" (*Roots and Shadows* 36)

Urmi in *The Binding Vine*, Sumi, in *A Matter of Time* Madhu in *Small Remedies* and Manjari, in *Moving On*, are in a dire predicament at some point of time through no fault of their own. Deshpande's tenth novel, *In the Country of Deceit* gives an account of Devayani, a modern

woman who follows her instinct of love and passion, at the expense of her reputation for a man like Ashok, a father of a ten year old daughter.

When it comes to her latest novel, *Shadow Play*, ‘a book that explores relationships, societal norms, gender, identity and change, she says, “It all comes down to universal themes that lead back to people. Human beings are extremely complex. As an author, I need to show the complexity — that is the beginning of novel writing.”

In *That Long Silence* Jaya realizes she was at risk because of Mohan who tried to play a dominating role all the time. Her unquestioning attitude in effect proves dangerous for her life.

In some novels, the roles of fury and destiny are played out as main themes around which Deshpande weaves her tale. Deshpande explains the role of fury in her words,

“I thought of Puradars’s line, the hour strikes and I was terrified. I stopped believing in the life I was leading; suddenly it seemed unreal to me and I know I could not go on. ” (Gunjan 129)

Thus Deshpande’s novels scrupulously highlight a realistic picture of the inner sufferings, inconsolable cries and the deep disappointments of women in society. S.P Swain says:

“The novels of Sashi Deshpande are a realistic portrayal of the Indian middle- class educated women. Deshpande successfully presents these women as they are engaged in the complex and difficult social and psychological problem of defining authentic self. She delineates them with their variegated swings of mood, the ebb and flow of joy and despair.” (Swain 39)

Deshpande’s novels take into account the clash between tradition and modernity, and between constancy and experimentation. The young character mounts an uphill battle against age

old tradition, entrenched social norms, customs and usages and patriarchal values, showing bitter angst and repugnance towards adverse circumstance. Deshpande's novels can be treated as a quest for women's fulfillment. Thus Naik rightly says:

"The most outstanding woman novelist of the period is Shashi Deshpande, the overarching theme in whose work is woman's quest for fulfilment and then she is thwarted at every stage by the forces of custom and tradition" (Naik 211).

Deshpande is one of the serious Indian English novelists, who has faithfully portrayed the realistic account of Indian woman, in particular, the life of middleclass woman, although she steadfastly refuses to be branded as a feminist in her interviews and public speeches . She has just advanced the cause of woman. In one of her interviews, she emphasizes:

I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. I fully agree with Simone de Beauvoir that, "the fact that we are human, is much more important than our being men and women." I think that is my idea of feminism. (Pathak 224)

Thus G.S Amur rightly observes "Women's struggle in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and, most important of all, as human being, is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer" (Amur 10).

Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande have indeed sharpened their observation of life and added a psychological depth to their writings to listen to the voice of agony and redress the genuine grievances of the oppressed. Breaking new ground for the younger generation of Indian women novelists, they offer insights, a wealth of understanding, layers of meaning, basis for discussion and food for thought and introspection. Naik's perception is quite appropriate in this regard:

The 'new' women novelists naturally share most of the preoccupations of their male counterparts, though in spite of what fanatical feminists would claim, they do have 'a room of their own' in the fictional mansion, in terms of certain pressing concerns and attitude towards them. (210)

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