

The Question of Identity in Anita Desai's Story "The Domestic Maid"

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Abstract

The paper analyses the creative writing of Anita Desai as represented in her novel - "The Domestic Maid". Anita Desai occupies a very important position in the canon of contemporary Indian English writing. Throughout her writing she focuses on the personal struggles of middle class women who try to overcome the societal burdens imposed by a tradition-bound patriarchal set-up in contemporary India. Most of Desai's narratives stress on the importance of familial bonds and explore the tensions in society with cultural and social changes.

In "The Domestic Maid" (2014) Anita Desai focuses on the woman living under patriarchal culture as well as brings out misrepresentation of women in society.

"The Domestic Maid" (2014) presents an account of grave experiences in the life of ordinary Indian women especially belonging to lower class, the domestic maids.

The novel analyses the struggle of a woman to find and assert her identity.

One may define identity as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group.

Keywords: Anita Desai, The Domestic Maid, Post-Colonial Identity, Middle-class women

Paper Type: Perspective Essay

Introduction

Identity takes its root from the Latin word 'idem' meaning 'same' which implies the state of being or remaining the same under varying aspects or conditions-the condition of being oneself or itself and not other. Erik Erikson says that we cannot separate personal growth and communal change. We cannot separate identity crises in an individual's life. According to him we are born in community which gives us identity as we give identity to community. One may define *identity* as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group. Identity may be distinguished from identification; identity is a label, whereas identification refers to the classifying act itself. Identity is thus best construed as being both relational and contextual, while the act of identification is best viewed as inherently processual. A *psychological identity* relates to self-image, self-esteem and individuality. Consequently, Weinreich gives the definition "A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present, expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as

one aspires to be in the future"; this allows for definitions of aspects of identity, such as: "One's ethnic identity is defined as that part of the totality of one's self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one's construal of past ancestry and one's future aspirations in relation to ethnicity" (Weinreich, 1986a).

Anita Desai occupies a very important position in the canon of contemporary Indian English writing. Her career as novelist began with publication of *The Peacock* in 1963. She is noted for her sensitive portrayal of the female characters as a novelist and short story writer. Many of her novels deal with the tension between family members as well as loneliness and the alienation of middle class women. Her novels explore the dilemma of existence. In some of her novels women characters respond to change and disillusionment in society with openness. Her novels primarily deal with individual identity and individual consciousness. Her characters undergo crises of consciousness. They are alienated, lonely and misfit in real life. Anita Desai uses various strategies for the construction of women's identity in her novels.

Anita Desai is well-known for her studies of Indian life. Throughout her writing she focuses on the personal struggles of middle class women who try to overcome the societal burdens imposed by a tradition-bound patriarchal set-up in Contemporary India. Most of Desai's narratives stress on the importance of familial bonds and explore the tensions in society with cultural and social changes. Anita Desai concerns such issues as hybridity, shifting identity and so on. Most of Desai's works engage the complexities of modern Indian culture from a feminine perspective while highlighting the female Indian predicament of maintaining self-identity as an individual woman. This study means to investigate the role and contribution of patriarchy and patriarchal values towards the misery, suffering, loneliness and unhappiness of women who experience psychological, social and economic problems.

In *The Domestic Maid* (2014) Anita Desai focuses on the female living under patriarchal culture as well as brings out misrepresentation of woman in society. Women have to suffer a lot as society shapes a woman's understanding of herself, her society and her world. In the story the protagonist is a house maid who is at the mercy of society where she has to play the role of caretaker. Her qualities like sacrifice are ignored. Gender inequality is prominent here. The society is not supportive, rather it is indifferent to women. Cultural identity, gender discrimination, community and seclusion are the leading issues in the story. The social portrayal of Indian women is presented in Anita Desai's short story *The Domestic Maid* which is a feminist chunk built upon the theme of Hindu womanhood's self-sacrifice.

Anita Desai gives a postcolonial touch to her female characters in her story "The Domestic Maid". This story depicts how loss of identity creates various problems physical as well as psychological- in human life. Geeta the protagonist has lost her identity as a woman, maid and wife. She has been working as a domestic maid with 702 *waalimemsaab* i.e. her employer Asha. Sometimes Geeta is late for her duty because of family problems. Without realising her problems, Asha scolds her off and on and even threatens to cut some amount from her salary. As Geeta is subjugated and her voice is suppressed, she has lost her identity as a human being. On other hand Asha is also in search of her identity as a wife. As her husband is always travelling, she has to look after her child and attend her duties in the office. Her stress and strain leads her on the brink of frustration which she tries to heap on her maid, Geeta. Only Chhaya's search for identity is fulfilled as she understands how women have to face problems in family. She even comforts her friend, Geeta. Thus Anita Desai's present postcolonial story talks about suffering and injustice and cultural identity of women.

Features of Identity

- Identity means state of being or remaining the same under different conditions.
- Personal growth or development depends on communal change.
- Community gives identity to a person and a person gives identity to the community.
- A person finds himself or herself in identity crises.

The Question of identity from the Postcolonial Approach

According to G. Rai “Postcolonialism is an enterprise which seeks emancipation from all types of subjugation defined in terms of gender, race and class. It does not introduce a new world which is free from the ills of colonialism. It rather suggests both continuity and change.”

Sudhir Arora writes, 'Post colonialism presents the identity of the colonized and its culture represents the unrepresented and voicing the unvoiced with a post not available in colonialism'.

Analysis

In the story *The Domestic Maid*, Anita Desai handles various problems of men as well as women in contemporary society. In patriarchal mode of society, women have to face different problems like dehumanization, insult, humiliation, injustice and so on. The women are exploited not only by the men but also by the women themselves. These exploited women become fragmented characters who face the greatest problems that are discussed in this story.

Anita Desai's *The Domestic Maid* (2014) presents an account of grave experiences in the life of ordinary Indian women especially belonging to lower class, the domestic maids. Here the group of maids comprises of young, middle-aged and old women with bare necessities of life. They play the role of caretaker in the society, while facing various problems in their lives. But these women are not given any importance by others in society. The writer says, 'Why would they; what's special about them? Nothing.' (Desai, 2014: p.1). These domestic maids have really lost their identity as there is nothing special about them from society's point of view. These women are just caretakers, housekeepers and not more than that. When the group of women arrives at the huge iron gates of their work places 'they show their identity cards to the guards. A card that certifies their social status, an identity- that of a Domestic Maid.' (Desai, 2014: p.1). These women have to do various household chores like cleaning, washing, cooking, baby-sitting etc. But sometimes they are not treated like a human being. Their voice is suppressed and they are harassed and oppressed. They are abused and even beaten by their employer. These women have really lost their identity as human beings and they are in search of it. Anita Desai gives a postcolonial touch to her female characters in her story 'The Domestic Maid'. This story depicts how loss of identity creates various problems- physical as well as psychological- in human life. She vividly presents the social plight of women, their predicament which they try to forget through '*chit-chat*'.

In the present story, Geeta, the protagonist is a poor maid. She has lost her identity as a women, maid and wife. She is leading life full of hardships and miseries without any complaint. In order to improve her condition, she enters city life with her husband Prakash and two children. The condition of other women is not different. Geeta has been working as domestic maid with 702 *waalimemsaab* i.e. her employer Asha. When she arrives at the gate, 'The guard is in no mood for small talk and dismisses her with a shrug.' (Desai,2014 p.1). She is humiliated. As a woman Geeta has lost her identity. Even the security guard gives her such a treatment. Desai points out how women face humiliation in a patriarchal culture.

Geeta works part-time at Asha's house. Asha always keeps her scolding and shouting at her "You are late again Geeta. What's the matter with you; don't you understand when I ask you to come early?" (Desai, 2014, p.2). Asha's voice is shrill with anger. She never tries to understand the problems faced by Geeta. "Have you taken up other on my time? I have to leave for office and I will be late because of you. This time I will cut your salary." (Desai,2014. p.2). Thus Asha scolds and even threatens her of cutting her salary. Geeta, the maid is totally humiliated by her employer whom Geeta is unable to relate her problems. She is as good as subaltern whose voice is suppressed. She is unable to fight back or argue vehemently with her employer. She even can't toughen her stand against the nagging. This is Geeta identity at the work place. Asha continues to berate the maid, "why don't you answer, why are you late? Too much money and food has gone into your stomach, that's why you people take advantage of good people like us (Desai,2014 p2). When Geeta makes an attempt to explain the reason for being late by saying that she had to go to the dispensary. Asha doesn't believe her. Geeta is in dilemma how to express her problems and convince her employer. While going about her work, Geeta's mind is filled with thousand thoughts, 'these rich people have no compassion for poor women like us. Don't they ever realize that life is a daily struggle for us? They have all the facilities in this beautiful house, bathroom, running water, kitchen stuffed with at least two months of rations and snacks. But we do not have even the basic necessities to lead a dignified life. Even small delays make them shout and curse us like hell. Who should I complain to?" (Desai 2014.p.3). Geeta is totally helpless. Poverty is a curse for this maid as she has to listen quietly to all the complaints against her made by Asha. Asha even goes further warning her, "Now don't be late tomorrow or I will chuck you out. There are a hundred women out there waiting to work at my place." (Desai, 2014.p3). Thus helpless poor Geeta is struggling in search of her real identity. 'Have subalterns a voice?' This is the question in the mind of Geeta. She is totally suppressed, oppressed and humiliated by her employer at the work place. Even 'A passing guard leers at them and makes a vulgar guttural sound. The girls glare at him, other than that have no choice but to ignore him." (Desai, 2014.p.4). Thus an act of women's humiliation is continuous at their work places.

At home Geeta's condition is not so different. As a wife she has to undergo so many trials and tribulations. Her husband is tyrant and always beats her. Her friend Chhaya asks her, "What happened last night; why was 'Prakash beating you?" (Desai, 2014. P.5) Her husband wanted her to borrow some money from her employer to buy a cycle but Geeta refused to do so as she had already borrowed from different places. He beat her black and blue. 'When I refused to borrow anymore, he punished me' (Desai, 2014. P.5). This is Geeta's identity as a wife. She is none but a servant who gets inhuman treatment at home.

Geeta's friend, Chhaya is a person of understanding. She learnt the tricks of their trade very early in the city and knew that this is a situation woman like them have to live with, all through their lives. She always tries to console Geeta by saying "Don't worry, this happens to all of us. These women do not understand the difficulties we go through. They have money and a comfortable life." (Desai, 2014.p4). Chhaya seems to be a balanced character. She doesn't show her frustration and depression.

Conclusion

Anita Desai has a humanistic concern while exploring the psychic condition of her female characters. She suggests remedies to their problems. Her novels and stories are sensitive portrayal of the changing face of Indian society. She defines individual desire for self-fulfilment. According to her living in society and maintaining one's individual identity is a challenging task. Her works emphasise the primacy of the individual identity and individual consciousness. Anita Desai presents various postcolonial experiences

and problems like poor education and violence against females, early marriages, badly arranged marriages, and so on in her novels and stories. Out of these problems, the quest of identity arises. The women become neurotic under patriarchy which gives power to men and marginalize women. Identity crises arise in any country, the land of paucity or the land of plenty. When the fragmented self loses its identity, the question of identity comes to surface which has been studied in Anita Desai's short story "The Domestic Maid".

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