



THE CONCERN OF ETHICS IN SELECT WORKS OF ANITA DESAI

DR. JAYEETA RAY

Associate Professor,
Department of English,
Rabindra Bharati University,
Kolkata (WB) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Fire on the Mountain, the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize (1977) and the Sahitya Akademy Award (1978) winning novel of Anita Desai explores the ethical and moral dimensions brought forward by the conflicts and confusions presented in the lives of the three women characters Nanda Kaul, Ila Das and Raka, the great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul. Both the elderly women are caught in the rigmarole of duties, obligations and responsibilities at the cost of their own peace and happiness and an urge to get back all their lost freedom and happiness.

Key Words: *Ethical, moral dimensions, moral and spiritual needs, lost freedom, idealistic thoughts, moral anchor.*

INTRODUCTION

Moral preoccupations are the hallmarks of a good piece of literature and Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* is one work that as F.R. Leavis opines in *The Great Tradition*, "They are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience and a marked moral intensity". (Quoted in Lodge, 69). David Lodge, another critic focuses on the notions like 'moral intensity' at the very core of critical judgement in the context of what he suggests as "they are not really literary concepts, but ethical ones".

DR. JAYEETA RAY

1 Page



Ethics lie at the core of Desai's novels. Nanda Kaul, who Nanda Kaul, in *Fire on the Mountain* had lived an extremely hectic life as the wife of a Vice Chancellor in a University in Punjab, and the mother of quite a number of children feels harassed and tired of such a busy life. She decides to spend the rest of her life (after the demise of her husband) in Carignano, a secluded abode at Kasauli, feeling fed –up with her act of multi- tasking , she feels helpless, neglected and from the perspective of Dharma, she feels that the world has done her a whole lot of injustice. In Hinduism, Dharma is one of the oldest philosophical concepts dealing with man's moral and spiritual needs and this gets manifested in Nanda Kaul's wish to forego her former busy , worldly life of comfort and luxuries though lacking warmth and spending the last of her life in the lap of nature without any interference or disturbance. Ila Das, a lady to be pitied with her shrill, croaking voice and clumsy gait who though born rich is brought to rags as an unfortunate work of stars and planets and Desai shows both the ladies sharing a common set of rules, customs, habits, beliefs and education and having experienced the same fate of being cast aside and forced to live in isolation, the two women continue their long, arduous and weary journey of life. Both the women are caught in the cross – currents of moral laws imposed by society and how they react and respond to the situations is what the paper is all about.

Anita Desai, apart from her novel has also published *Diamond Dust*, a collection of short stories and in that collection is, "A Devoted Son" is the best example for her idealistic thoughts and ethical renditions. The narrative deals with the sacrifices of a boy's parents who cope with real tough times to help him become a doctor and the son also reciprocates their love and sacrifice. Almost all the works of Anita Desai serve as milestones in their search for some sort of moral anchor in their lives.

Anita Desai is a writer par excellence. Her choice of words, images appeal to the readers and lift her above the run –of –the – mill writers. She is the most influential personalities among the contemporary Indian writers. She focuses on various elements like political and ideological reinforcement as her focal points. In her novel *The Village by the Sea* she won the 1983 Guardian's Children's Fiction Prize in 1963. She considers *Clear Light of the Day* (1980) her most autobiographical work as it is set during the coming of age and also in the same neighbourhood in which she grew up. Her short story, "A Devoted Son" is the best example for the idealistic thoughts about the human relationships and their response in society. Anita Desai succeeds in charting the son's character who after becoming a doctor reciprocates his parents love and affection with greater responsibility. The novel focuses on the plight of a father and a mother who sacrificed their luxuries in order to establish their son in society. They succeeded in making their son a doctor by making the impossible possible. The story highlights on those values that are fast disappearing from our society. This work is



celebrated for augmenting the human relationships in a healthy ambience though the world is technologically driven and has no place for values and ethics.

Rakesh is the protagonist of this story. He was born to illiterate parents. He had been a first generation learner. His education took him to the U.S.A. Villagers felt proud as Rakesh stood first though the jealousy factor did not stop to exist. They express their feelings in this way:

“To everyone who came to him to say “Mubarak Varmaji, your son has brought you glory”, the father said “Yes”.

After the arrival, he married an Indian girl instead of marrying someone from abroad. This surprised his neighbours who had taken it for granted that he would never marry an Indian. The villagers, the neighbours of Rakesh suffered from complexes as he went to the U.S.A. for higher education. His education took him there and this triggered the jealousy factor in the neighbours. He further surprised his neighbours by marrying an uneducated village girl from a humble background who was very good natured. They had a son shortly afterwards and he not only owned his own car and house but also rose to prominence in his career. However, his immense wealth and riches did not stop him from taking care of his parents. Rakesh was not only a dutiful son but was also a good matured gentleman. He not only was an obedient son but was also was a dutiful husband and a loving and caring father and in addition was an excellent doctor. But as is the fate of all good and ethical people, soon Rakesh became an eye sore for his father as after the demise of his mother he took special care of his father’s diet and this irked the senior man a lot as he felt irritated with this over indulgence, over – concern and interference of his son. He cut down on his intake of sweets, fried and oily stuff, betel nuts and other delicacies but this good and caring gesture on the part of the son was misinterpreted as a mark of disrespect by the senile father. The father was angered to the extent that he started complaining to his neighbours about this controlling attitude of his son. Even when his son went to give him the medicines, he flung the bottle and shouted, “keep your tonic – I want none – I want none – I won’t take any more of – of your medicines. None, never, “and he swept the bottle out of his son’s hand with a wave of his own...”

Thus we see how the good, noble intentions of the son come to nought by the father who has lost all his good senses. He even utters, “let me die, I tell you”. The misunderstandings created a rift between the father- son duo and estranged them emotionally but the wife of Rakesh had the good sense to stay away from the father – son relationship. But the son’s devotion is exemplary for he relentlessly serves his father despite all the objections of the old man. However, the good intentions of the son came to be misinterpreted time – and – again by the father and the catch lies in the fact that whether one should measure to what extent he/



she should take care of his/her aged parents. If they misinterpret and complain about our love and care should we start living a selfish life?

Rakesh serves as an eye-opener to the next generations as to how a son/daughter should behave towards their old and helpless parents. The writer becomes successful in guiding the young generation to taking good care of their parents instead of neglecting them.

Even in other renowned novels by the same author, Anita Desai, we see how the human bond is fastened and given importance. The story of another famous novel *Fire on the Mountain*, the story centres around women- the two elderly women who have not been given their dues as good and honest women by the men in their lives, the Vice Chancellor, husband of Nanda Kaul and the usurping brothers in the case of Ila das. Nanda Kaul wills away her past life of people and events and instead desires for a life of peace and composure among the pine trees and the silence of Carignano, her stark bungalow at Kasauli.

What she was supposed to get from her family – her husband, the V.C. of a University in Punjab who had never given any importance to her feelings, sentiments and desires and her daughters had all been selfish and had only exploited her. The husband gave her the comforts and luxuries of a queen but remained unfaithful in their relationship as he carried a steady affair with another lady. Nanda was the one who took care of their children and the children of her children. Raka, the ailing child of Asha is one of such grand children who are taken care of by their great grandmother. David Lodge, a great literary critic has some kind of understanding of the moral values “...come into play in the study of literature.” (71) and thus he opines that critics should not “refrain from discussing the moral dimension of novels in the course of reaching literary evaluation”. (72) though he states that this should be backed and controlled by some literary experience. The novel serves as a case study of the lives of two solitary women, one leading the life of a hermit in the peace of Kasauli and the other a spinster, a life-long friend of hers who tries to make both ends meet in the nearby foothills as a Government Social Welfare Worker. Their past and present time is a gyre of deprivations, betrayals, lack of trust, faith and death of love and respect and all these make up the ethical dimension of the novel.

The paper is an attempt to understand and explore the concept of Dharma (ethics) through literary language and its linguistic devices (paradox, irony, tension etc) generated through the writer’s careful arrangement of words and application of figurative language (symbols, images, similes, metaphors etc) to communicate ideas, feelings, suggestions that may lead to the various dimensions and interpretations of Dharma.



Having led their lives, sharing common set of rules, customs, habits, beliefs and education and having experienced the same fate of being cast aside both ladies get vexed with the fate that befalls them, the cacophony of children, their nannies and unwanted orders from her mother –in – law. She performs her duty as the wife of V.C. on the one hand and on the other hand she performs her role as the mother of her children with elan. Her own wishes and aspirations take a back seat and these have never mattered to her husband. Only the little one hour afternoon nap when she closes her eyes and shuts out the entire world may be called her own.

Ethics may be divided into subjective and objective. On the surface level performance of one's duties adheres to objective ethics whereas subjective ethics make up those morals that have been internalized. Performance of right action is the main cause of concern for the two women characters. Sharing a common trajectory of fate, both these women are cast aside and forced to lead a miserable life of neglect, lacking in love and respect and being used as a beast of burden to run the household in a smooth manner, these women have no time to rest. Like mentioned earlier Nanda Kaul has no rest but for that one hour of afternoon nap as the token of her 'me' time and to denote that all her other hours are for others but that one hour is for her own and her husband has to accept and respect it. She does for every one more than her dues and performs her duties well and comes to live the life of a recluse in the twilight period of her life after the death of her husband and after all her children have established themselves, she hopes that others may not have anything more to demand of her but she is sadly mistaken as she soon realizes that her duty towards others is not yet over when she all of a sudden receives two pieces of news- one of her friend, Ila Das wishes to visit her and requests for a date for meeting her and the other and greater surprise is when Raka, her great granddaughter comes to visit and stay with her.

Nanda wants to evade the past and simply refuses to entertain the bosom friend Ila Das as she wanted to forget the past and the friend of her old times would certainly remind her of her dark and depressing past. Born to an affluent family and being given lessons in piano, sing rhymes by nannies, this friend and her sisters led a pretty privileged upbringing but her prodigal brothers squandered all the wealth and family resources and finally after the father's death due to stroke drove out their mother with the broken hip and their sisters from their home without any penny and even depriving them of the last bit of their jewellery. The two sisters felt not capable of facing any reality and yet facing life with a smiling face and thus started their battle with their destiny by giving lessons in piano and Ila (by receiving Nnda's support) of teaching in the Home Science College where the great grandmother's husband had been the Vice Chancellor. Ila Das had been in the best period of her life when she had no tensions of food and roof over her head, as the job of a teacher in the University secured her basic needs. Then she enjoyed a brief period of respite which came to an abrupt end when she

DR. JAYEETA RAY

5 Page



was superseded by one of her junior colleagues in filling up the post of the Principal of her college. In such a situation as suiting her upbringing, she thought and felt it best to submit her resignation letter. She was morally inclined to run from pillar to post to seek for a job rather than face humiliation, thereby solving her moral dilemma, whether to continue with her post or whether to bunk the job. Thus the question of moral ability and ethical principles come into play. This old lady was rescued from a life of drudgery by her friend Nanda Kaul who found her a job of a Social Welfare Worker, helping the families fight child marriage and spreading knowledge about health and hygiene issues etc. This same lady appears as the relic of her past self. She has been taunted by her fate and with her hair tied in a grey top knot, spectacles tied with a ribbon to stop it from falling off her nose and a disturbingly shrill voice. Unable to keep up to her standards of living and always in search of a home, food and a job this lady clings on to her friend, Nanda Kaul in a bid to remain hooked to the memories of her salad days. She seems to be not able to come to grips with her sheltered childhood days and her life of deprivation and starvation. She gets raped in a process of trying to reprimand the parents of a girl child who was about to get a minor girl aged seven married to an aged man. She gets raped by the father of this girl in a most brutal and inhuman manner.

Anita Desai uses words like “crushed back”, “raped”, “broken” reinforced her broken and dilapidated condition and actions that went contrary to humanity and morality is one of the masterstrokes of this great artist, another being the determination of Nanda Kaul to ignore all demands of others how much ever they may be urgent and pressing because this emotion prevented Nanda Kaul from providing shelter and comfort to her old and good friend, Ila Das and just as the old friend considered it her Dharma to avoid being a burden on Nanda Kaul, so also the latter thought it her Dharma to protect and safeguard her privacy. Thus when Nanda receives the news of the demise of her friend she refuses to see the veracity of this piece of news because her guilt conscience does not allow her to admit the truth. Nanda is profoundly troubled by the turn of events because she realizes that this tragedy could have been averted had she opened her heart to her friend or given some sort of advice, solace and comfort to the helpless soul. This sudden rush of emotions is too heavy for her to grapple with and this chokes her as she cannot find tears to cry out loud and when Raka enters the great grandmother’s room she finds her sitting on a stool with her head hanging.

Thus the ending of the novel brings before us many issues of Dharma, for instance from the case of Nanda Kaul, whether it was right to ignore one’s duties towards others and remain cocooned in one’s private world or whether it would be right to simply ignore one’s own likes, dislikes, mental and emotional well being and go ahead in relieving the burden of others. Anita Desai with her deft hands weaves a web of tussle in the hearts and minds of her readers for Nanda Kaul’s dilemma would get interpreted differently by different people according to their personal definition of Dharma.



The conflict and confusion in the protagonists along the lines of Dharma or performance of one's duties is also clearly evident in the characters in Anita Desai's *Village by the Sea*, the way the two young orphan brother and sister fight against adverse situations to make both ends meet is worth nothing. Even in the novel *Clear light of Day* we find the over-conscientious characters like Bimla, the elder sister of Tara who sacrifices her life for her family quite unlike the self-centred younger sister Tara who marries and lives a cosy and comfortable life. Even in the character of Meera Masi, the aunt of Tara and Bimla we find an echo the selfless streak that is evident in Bimla.

Thus, in the works of Anita Desai the element of adherence to Dharma or one's own sense of ethics and values emerges sharply and poignantly through the treatment of her protagonists attempting to navigate their ways through different and difficult situations. The way they negotiate with their problems is what we as readers learn and gain from them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Desai, Anita. Desai, Anita. *Village by the Sea*, London: Heinemann, 1982.
Desai, Anita. *Clear Light of Day*. Penguin Random House, 2001.
Desai, Anita. *Cry, the Peacock*. Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980.
Desai, Anita. *Diamond Dust and Other Stories*, Vintage Digital, 2011
Desai, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*. India: Penguin Random House, 1977.
Desai, Anita. *Voices in the City*, Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965
Desai, Anita. *Where Shall We Go this Summer*. Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982.