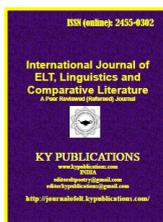




**EXPRESSION OF THE SELF AND ESCAPE FROM THE SELF
A COMPARITIVE STUDY OF R.K.NARAYAN AND ANITA DESAI IN THE ART OF
CHARACTERIZATION**

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ABSTRACT

Characterization is an art. The very life of the text to a great extent depends upon the nicety of the impact of the characters one comes across in the textual world. Writers make use of their characters as their mouth piece. It's through the characters that the writers reveal their ideas. Readers identify themselves with characters when the characters are realistic. The central character is called the hero. He stands by the side of Dharma. The one who opposes him is the one who follows the path of Adharma. The whole of the work of art is clash between the hero and the villain which is clash between dharma and adharm. The writers in order to establish poetic justice, punishes the bad and rewards the good. Nevertheless characters lead their independent life. The character of the characters is their individual destiny. That is how it is in the case of writers who have produced works of art that have withstood the test of time. They do not meddle with the characters. They allow the characters to grow when the characters can and show capabilities. Static characters represent either their own inefficiency or the inefficiency of their maker. Dynamic characters speak well not only of their own potentiality as literary entities but also of the credibility of their creator. The *willing suspension of disbelief* that Samuel Taylor Coleridge recommends for effective reading of a literary piece is also applicable for the writers in the sense the writer will have to have faith in his or her characters. He or She may keenly watch the movement of the character but should not consciously control them. When the writers begin to restrict the movement of the characters as per his whims and fancies, the characters lose life and stay flat. Only round characters grow and attract the attention of the fellow characters and also of the readers. Flat Characters fall flat in the minds of the readers. This article examines the treatment of characters by two popularly successful Indian writers in English: R.K.Narayan and Anita Desai. In the art of characterization R.K.Narayan easily surpasses Anita Desai on account of his generosity; his willingness to let his character grow. Desai retains her strangle hold on her character and denies growth to it even when situation warrants growth. It's very difficult to associate this unwillingness of the writer to anything but prejudice. The article primarily focuses its attention on R.K.Narayan's *The Guide* and Anita Desai's *The Surface Texture*. Desai's own works are used for references to reiterate the point that the writer suffers from prejudice against men that very much affect her potentiality as a writer.

KEYWORDS: Dynamic character, Flat characters, Round characters, Static characters, Catharsis



INTRODUCTION

The end of literature is not merely to please but also to preach. A work of art attains literary status and recognition as an asset to mankind only if it reaches the depth of the realities of life. A writer through his characters and their experiences only tries to interpret the intricacies of life that lie hidden to the common human eyes. Novel, in particular is the most eclectic form of writing as it provides the writers with a large canvas to present life in a broader and truer perspective. Novelists like Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and Henry James have exploited this form to portray life in all its dimensions. The works of these great writers have withstood the test of time like beacon lights that stands to draw rudderless boats last in the sea to the shore of safety. Artistic integrity of the writers is therefore of utmost importance by that we mean the sincerity of the writers to stay true to the spirit of their creativity. One of the foremost duties of the writers is to keep their works free from their personal prejudice.

A character turns into a mere puppet in the hands of the writer if the writer consciously controls the movements of the character. But when the personal whims and fancies of the writers stay away from their shaping spirit of imagination, the character grows out of the writer's hand naturally and seeks its own destiny. "Faustus is gone regard his hellish fall" writes Marlow in his famous Epilogue referring to the edifying end that one of the best characters had fallen into. R.K. Narayan also lets his characters such freedom to choose their own end. But Anita Desai never allows her male characters to go out of her reach to grow even if situation favour their growth. R.K. Narayan 's *The Guide* when studied in juxtaposition with one of the short stories of Anita Desai titled 'Surface textures would prove the point. While the comparison serves as the heart of the issue, an attempt is also made to produce evidences from the works of Desai to reiterate the point that Desai is prejudiced against men even in her portrayal of their death .Even death fails to level the deep rooted prejudice in the writer.

RAJU- THE GUIDE

Raju, the hero of *The Guide* was an opportunist and a cheater. Velan, an innocent villager mistakes him for a holly man, not knowing the fact that Raju had been just then released from prison. Raju willingly misleads him in order to eke out a living. But this is nothing when compared to what he had done in the past. As a tourist guide he had particularly misguided a lady and had indirectly been responsible for widening of gap between the husband and wife. Rosie, the lady like women in the novels of Anita Desai, was a neglected woman starving for love and affection of her men. Had Raju been honest, he could have brought reconciliation between the two. But Raju deliberately exploited the helplessness of the lady to his favour in order to be constantly in her company.

Such a rogue of a man can hardly be expected to be honest with an innocent villager like Velan who had begun to worship him straightaway for his saintly appearance and eloquence. When more and more of the villagers began to worship Raju for his saintly appearance, he began to behave as if he were truly one. R. K. Narayan's fair handling permits this character to grow in stature and turn into an unforgettable personality in life and literature.

"Evil deeds return to plague the inventor" to establish poetic justice. Sometimes the evildoers manage to get away with their deeds by some stroke of fortune. The irony of life is so unpredictable that it even permits transformation of a sinner into saint. Of these three possibilities, R.K. Narayan, much to his credit, prefers the third one for his man. Sinner Raju turns into a saint much to the delight of the gender to which he belongs.

Raju was definitely not the one who said that he would fast till the village received its rain. But when such a situation arose, he would not withdraw. Initially he fasted not knowing why. But the sacredness in the act of fasting for a noble cause changed Raju for the better. On the eleventh day though the doctor and the government requested him to complete his fast he would not listen to them.



... Raju could not walk but he insisted upon pulling himself along. He went down the steps of river shut his eyes and turned towards the mountain. Raju opened his eyes and said "Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs-he sagged down. (*The Guide*, 1987, p.247)

Thus the wayward Raju becomes a saint winning the admiration and adoration of thousands of followers.

HARISH-THE SURFACE TEXTURE

In Anita Desai's short story 'Surface Texture', Harish, a clerk in a government office, carefully avoided getting to the interior of things in life. He could watch a watermelon without cutting it open or just feel the surface of the smooth book without ever opening it. These long devoted looks at ledgers were not well appreciated by the public that demanded their share of kerosene, rice, and sugar. Harish searched –slid about, hunted, gazed and at last found a thick book of rules. Harish ran the ball of his thumb edge across the pages. All afternoon he massaged the edges of the book's seven hundred and odd pages tenderly, wondering. As a natural outcome of his lackadaisical attitude, Harish gets dismissed from the government service thanks to the innumerable complaints lodged against him. When he lost his job, his wife could do nothing better than to leave him to himself, knowing that there is no point in expecting him to change anymore.

This man was taken for a sage, first by children and then by their parents. If eloquence helped Raju, the guide to win the attention of the people, silence does the same for Harish. While R.K.Narayan allows his Raju to grow Anita Desai leaves Harish high and dry. Harish

'...did not speak and his silence made him still hollower, safer. So they worshipped him, fed and watched over him, interpreting his moves in their own fashion, and Harish in turn, watched over their offerings and worshiped'. (Desai, 1978, 40)

Thus ends the story in a prosaic manner making no poetic pretensions. While Raju's transformation from Sinner to Saint is natural in R.K.Narayan's world, deterioration from the status of a clerk to the level of a mendicant is equally natural for men in the world of Anita Desai. Progression and retrogressions are part and parcel of human life. But in the case of Desai's men, decline and down fall seems to be natural outcome of their inner inabilities. Progress is a flower that never blooms in the garden of weeds.

DEATH, THE LEVELLER

The prejudice of Desai is so deep rooted against men that even Death, the *leveller* is not allowed to level the difference. Death of female protagonists are described with such passion that they find a never dying place in the minds of the readers. But the death of male protagonists is reported so dryly that the very life of the character loses all its significance. The case of *Monisha of voice in the city* when studied in juxtaposition with the shortest report of the death of Mira Masi's husband would prove the point. The author pours out her heart while describing the death of the female protagonist, Monisha who burns herself to death in *voices in the city*

Two elements had met, and in their embrace, she was caught. Warmth, heart, terrible heat, a bright glare, smoke, an unbearably loud noise-bubbling, hissing, a gigantic cracking and whipping in her ears heat seared her eyeballs-a great fog enveloped her, not the white one of dreams but black, acrid, thick-and God the pain! Here it was, on her eyes, her face, here it came-there, all over-with her arms she wrestled with it, she fought it, it was not what she wanted-she screamed No! No! No! Screamed, Screamed. Fell unconscious, very quickly fell unconscious.(VC 242)

But the writer seems to be in quite a different frame of mind when she deals with death of a male character. The passion is missing when she deals with death of a male character.

Her young student husband, having left to study in England immediately after their wedding caught a cold in the rain one winter night and died (CLD 108)

Still worse is the description of the death of Baumgartner which create a moribund revulsion in the readers



...he stared at the body on the divan- yes; the pale mound of yellow tallow was oozing with something dark, liquid. It was not like blood, it was like diarrhoea of blood... Kurt felt a bubble rise in his throat...No one wanting to touch, to be touched by death, by the dead. Hands and handkerchiefs rising instinctively to mouths, noses. Not to breathe in death (BB 229)

Gender bias, in a very unusual sense of the term is definitely found in the works of Anita Desai. The net result of this undesirable trait is that she, the writer had grown quite predictable and this predictability robs her works of their essential charm.

CONCLUSION

Objectivity had always been regarded as a desirable quality in writers. It is good for both the art and the artist. Homer was commended highly by critics for the high level of objectivity he could maintain. One critic even wrote, "Homer's has the most objectivity, i.e., complete surrender of the creative powers to the object without any intrusions of the poet's own thoughts, feelings, or personal relations."

T.S. Eliot is a serious champion of impersonals in Literature. In his impersonal theory of Poetry he argues that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality". He further goes on to say that "The progress of the artist is a continual self sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." He perhaps hits the nail on the head of the issue when he says "The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done".

Henry James puts it better when he says

...Such a witness to the human comedy fairly holds his breath for the fear of arresting or directing that natural licence. (James Henry, 1957, 78-79)

It is the natural licence of the characters that make them living breathing realities. It is the natural licence that offers them the semblance of human beings next door. The laughter of the characters pleases us and their pain pains us. Their experiences become our own and their failures and frustrations rattle us to our bones causing cathartic effect that enhances the value of the work of art. It's exactly the author's denial of natural licence to her character that deprives her great works of true impact. A careful reader of Anita Desai knows for certain, certain things. When the writer introduces her pet characters like Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain* or Anamika in *Fasting, Feasting* with an endearing note of introduction, the readers tend to expect something horrible to happen to them through some one of the male characters in the novel and when that happens exactly, the readers are not surprised at all.

Perhaps one tends to agree with S. P. Swain's observation. In his article titled *A clash between Male Chauvinism and Existential Concerns in Anita Desai*, he says,

Her major novels tend to disappoint the reader due to their one-dimensionality, turning the characters wooden and insensitive. They are not kaleidoscopic in their thematic projection. In most of them there is a repeated and droll harping on the self (Swain, 2004, 253)

The droll harping on the self is due to the writer's unwillingness to let her characters lead their own lives. Her conscious efforts to curb their natural instinct turn them wooden and insensitive. Her personal prejudice robs her of her professional charm. Professional generosity of R.K. Narayan on the other hand renders his work personal charm that endears him to the readers. It's escape from the self and not the expression of the self that works in creative writing.

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