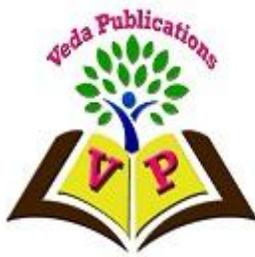


THE THEME OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SHORT STORIES “GAMES AT TWILIGHT” BY ANITA DESAI

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ABSTRACT



Most of the stories of modern literature are character dominant. Characterization is as important as the theme. The author gives a brief description of the character in the beginning of the story itself. He gives him a name and gives a brief physical description but it should not be built by what the author says about him. The character should reveal his/her individual traits by what he does, how he thinks, the way he talks, the gestures he makes, the philosophy he expresses etc. One of the traits is his/her relationship with other characters in the story. In the stories of Anita Desai, “Games at Twilight” she deals with different characters and their human relationships with other characters in beautiful way. The characters of Desai in her stories try to establish good human relationships with their counter parts, but are tinged with pain and agony.

Keywords: *Anita Desai, Games at Twilight, Human relationships, Tinged with pain and agony.*

INTRODUCTION

Most of the stories in this volume of short stories highlight the protagonist's subjugation of innocence, brutal force, human relationships, problems of children and women. The first story "Games at Twilight" presents the relationships among mothers and fathers and children. When the children like to go out into the verandah to play in a midsummer afternoon their mother bluntly refuses to send them out because she knows that her children are mischievous and as soon as they go out they forget their promise and rush out into the open yard. But their father takes pity on the children because they have been vexed with being inside the doors all the day. Anita Desai presents a mother's love as revealed in her safeguarding her of her children from the summer heat.

In another story, "Private Tutions by Mr. Bose", Anita Desai presents the wife and husband relationship within the frame work of the domestic life of Mr. Bose and his wife. Mr. Bose used to teach Sanskrit to Pritam, son of a Brahmin priest. When he asks the boy to give the meaning of the word, 'Asva', the student expresses his inability to do so. Then he wonders how the child of a priest fails to explain the meaning of such a simple word. He even asks the boy to read the lines again and learn it properly, and doesn't admonish the boy immediately. Such is the concern of the master for the boy. Desai also presents the wife and husband relationship and the bliss, petty quarrels and reunions between the wife and husband beautifully in this story.

"He nodded and sat down before his brass tray. She straightened it nervously, waved a hand over it as if to drive away a fly he could not see,, and turned to the fire to fry hot purees for him, one by one, turning quickly to heap them on his tray so fast that he begged her to stop..

'Eat more,' she coaxed. 'One more'- as though the extra puree were a peace offering following her rebellions of half an hour ago. 'And you? He asked.' 'Won't you eat now?' 'One more,' he told her, 'just one more,' he teased, and they laughed."¹

These lines reflect the understanding between the wife and husband.

In "Studies in Park" Desai describes the family relationships. The father is too much worried about his son's getting of a degree and also about his future. The mother worries about the health of her son. An affectionate bond of love binds them all. Suno, who is unable to react positively to these affectionate appeals, realizes the real meaning of life only after seeing a scene in the park:

"Hidden behind an oleander was a bench. A woman lay on it, stretched out. She was a Muslim, wrapped in a black borkha. I hesitated when I saw this straight, still figure in clack on the bench. Just then she lifted a plain thin hand and lifted her veil. I saw her face. It lay bared, in the black folds of her borkha, like a flower, wax-white, and composed, like a Persian lily or a tobacco flower at night...lay in the lap of a very old man. Very much older than her. With spectacles and long gray beard, like goat's or a

scholar's. He was looking down at her and caressing her so gently and tenderly. They stared at me but the man and the woman did not notice me. They never looked at anyone else, only at each other, with an expression that halted me. It was tender, loving, yes but in an inhuman way, so intense. Divine, I felt, or insane. I stood, half-hidden by the bush, holding by book, and wondered at them. She was ill, I could see, dying. Perhaps she had only a short time to live.”²

This awakening from monotonous life transforms his tenor of life. He gets a sense of liberation in that moment of shared love. Now his father's repeated warnings to get a first class and the pleas of other members doesn't bother him much. On the other hand he understands them well.

In another powerful story “Sales” Anita Desai presents the relationship of a wife and husband and their child. The protagonist is an artist who supports his family by selling his paintings. The husband and wife have harmonious relationship between them. The artist has to sell his paintings to support his family. He is reduced to the state of a beggar. The responsibility as the head of the family brings him to that level. The relationships that exist in the middle class family are the predominant theme in this story.

In another story “Surface Textures” the story begins from the point of view of Sheila a devoted wife to Harish, who is always preoccupied in observing the fine surface textures of the objects, neglects his family and household duties. He can no longer maintain his job in Government service and support his family. Everyone in the locality begin to call him a ‘hungry hyena’. One Mr. Bhatia also calls him ‘not human at all but like hungry hunch backed hyena hunting along the road’ His wife Sheila is a kind woman and takes the responsibility of the children. She is angry against Harish's ‘excessiveness’ and ‘pusillanimity’. She burst out on him on one occasion. The first few days she storms and screams against her husband like some shrill hurricane:

“How am I to go to market and buy vegetables for dinner? I don't even have enough for that. What am I to feed the boys tonight? No more milk for them. The washerwoman is asking for her bill to be paid. Do you hear? Do you hear? Moreover, we shall have to leave this flat. Where shall we go? She wept; she lay on her bed in a bath of tears and perspiration.”³

These lines throw light on the chasm between the wife and the husband. She returns to her parents' house when her husband fails to support the family. As a mother she automatically becomes the second choice in supporting the family. In this story, Desai s presents the human relationships in a middle class family in the context of parental responsibility. Though Sheila's character is not elevated in full, she represents ordinary humanity in the society. When her relationship with her husband does not go well she wants to develop her relationship with her parents for her bliss and happiness.

In the story "The Accompanist" Desai explores the relationship between the Ustad and a young boy who feels thrilled at the prospect of becoming a tampura player to his master. The young boy's father makes musical instruments and can also play several of them in a concert hall. He is known to all the musicians for his talent in making fine quality instruments. Mishraji, the young boy's father has made a tampura to Ustad Rohim Khan. The young boy goes to the concert hall to present it. At that time the tampura player of Ustad is not found anywhere and the Ustad calls the young boy to play tampura in Raga Deepak. From that day onwards the young boy becomes his tampura player. Their relationship as Ustad and the accompanist continue. Desai describes the relationship of the Ustad and the accompanist in the following lines, through the protagonist's view point:

"Ours is a world formed and defined and enclosed not so much by music, however, as by a human relationship on solid ground level- the relationship of love. Not an abstract quality, like music, or an intellectual one, like art, but a common human quality lived on an everyday level of reality-the quality of love. So I believe. What else is it that leaves us together as we play, so that I know every movement he will make before he himself does, and he can count on me to be always where he wants me? We never diverge; we leave and we arrive together, Is this not love? No marriage was closer." ⁴

As R.S. Sharma comments aptly

"The metaphysical leanings of Anita Desai are more compactly revealed in her short stories though such leanings tend to give them touch of unreality. For instance the relationship between Ustad and his disciple in 'The Accompanist' is presented in a manner as to give the impression of a homosexual relationship." ⁵

But Anita Desai sees the relationship as a kind initiation in which the affection of the initiator plays a significant role. She forgets the biological requirement of human problem in her eagerness to suggest the relationship between Ustad and his disciple. The young boy of fifteen is transformed into an accompanist. It is just like rebirth to him this second life is blessed to him by his Guru the Ustad. It leads to a kind of new awakening of the life in him.

"Devoted Son" is a fine and poignant story of a father and son relationship. Rakesh is a doctor of good reputation and known to be the devoted son of Mr. Sharma. He goes to America, does his M.D., and works in the most prestigious hospitals of U.S.A. and after earning a lot of money returns to India and constructs a big clinic of his own. Being a devoted son, he marries a girl selected by his mother. Mr. Sharma, Rakesh's father, lost his wife and falls ill with a mysterious disease; Rakesh is the only person who looks after his father. Though for some time his wife takes care of her father-in-law, she is vexed with his Peevish-whims. Soon nobody seemed to care him except Rakesh:

"It was Rakesh who brought him his morning tea, not in one of the china cups from which the rest of the family drank, but in the old man's favorite

brass tumbler, and sat at the edge of his bed, comfortable and relaxed with the string of his pajamas dangling out from under his fine lawn night-shirt, and discussed or, rather, read out the morning news to his father. It made no difference to him that his father made no response apart from the clinic in the evening, persuaded the old man to come out of his room, as bare and desolate as a cell, and take the evening air out in the garden.”⁶

This passage reveals the genuine concern of the son for his father. All this gratifies the old man but what he dislikes most about his son is the restrictions on his diet. To Rakesh it is his duty as a son to take every care of his father. Therefore, he uses every pill, tonic, and medicine to keep his father fit. But to Sharma it is just like a punishment. Life itself has become a burden to him. He doesn't want to live a life like this any longer, so he pleads with his son to leave him alone and let him die as he doesn't live a life like that. But the responsibility of a son does not let him die like that. The rigorous routine to which the doctor son puts his father seems almost tyrannical. The son sees the dietary restrictions as conducive to the well being of his father but the father considers them to be a denial not to be inflicted by a worthy son on an old father. The father complains to his friend on the dietary restrictions that are imposed on him by his son. The father and the son look at the same situation from two different angles and their attitudes involve two approaches to the problem of human existence. R.S. Sharma rightly comments on the behaviour of the son:

“The final protest of the father to take medicines leaves the reader to think whether the son is really justifiable in putting such rigorous restrictions of diet on old man's life. Do we have to subject ourselves to all the constrains of life in order to live?”⁷

In the story, “Pigeons at Daybreak” Desai describes of the homely and affectionate relationship between an aged wife and her husband in a beautiful manner. Mr.Basu is an asthma patient. His wife Otima takes all steps to keep her husband comfortable in hot summer days. She reads the news to him and the news of electricity cut increases breathlessness in Mr.Basu. She runs to the down stairs to bring inhaler like a little girl:

“She puts the paper away and rose with a sigh of irritation and anxiety, the kind a sickly child arouses in its fired mother. She herself, at fifty-six had not a wrinkle on her oiled face, scarcely a gray hair on her head. As smooth as butter, as round as a cake, life might still have been delectable to her if it had not been for the asthma that afflicted her husband and made him seem, at sixty-one, almost decrypt. I'll bring you your inhaler. Don't get worried, just don't get worried,’ she told him and bustled off to find his inhaler and cortisone.”⁸

When there is power cut at night she requests her neighbour to carry the string cot up to the terrace so that he can get a comfortable sleep in the open air. But he is not comfortable, and he

complains against Otima, his wife. She is too patient and traditional in looking after her sick husband. Desai here presents how the power cut in the city plays an important role in the relationship of the husband and wife. It very much worries the wife, who always takes too much care about the health of husband.

CONCLUSION

Thus the protagonists of Anita Desai try to establish good human relationships with their counter parts. All her stories highlight subjugation of innocence by brutal force, human relationships, the problems of children and women. In some of her stories she depicted wife and husband relationships, in some father and son, in few master and disciple.

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