

## **A Hermeneutical approach for the fulfillment of women's identity: A Psychological study of Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* and Gita Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel*.**

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### **Abstract**

Anita Desai and Gita Hariharan try to trace the different facets of the women in the contemporary Indian society. Among Indian English writers both portrays the complexity and different colours of India. The suppressed desires, their passion and the inner experience of the protagonists constitute their writings. It also depicts the emotional and moral isolation of the protagonists and explores the nature of the aspirations and struggle to reach at self-definition. Hermeneutics aims at the sign of interpretations and this paper deals with the art of interpretations inculcated by Anita Desai in *Fasting, Feasting* and Gita Hariharan *When Dreams Travel* for the accomplishment of women's identity. The women writers project the urges, dreams, desires and limitations of their protagonists. They also depict the drastic experience of women, emphasizing in particular the trials and tribulations of being a woman in a rigid patriarchal culture.

**Key words:** Hermeneutics, facets, complexity, protagonists, interpretation.

### **Introduction**

Ours is an age of great spiritual stress and strain. The modern man suffers from inner problem of isolation, meaningless in his way of existence. The existential problem is so crucial that it threatens every sphere of life. In this scenario, women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Gita Mehta, Gita Hariharan, Arundathi Roy and many more show deep interest into the human nature. They capture the Indian ethos very skillfully and successfully. Anita Desai and Gita Hariharan, the two proficient novelists' portray the complexity and different colours of India; focusing on the dilemmas of their women protagonists caught in an identity crisis, and their search for freedom. Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretations and Wilhelm Dilthey, a religious thinker in his last essay 'The Understanding of other Persons and their Manifestations of Life' (1910), makes it clear that this move from outer to inner, from expression to what is expressed, is not based on empathy. The empathy involves a direct identification with the other. The interpretation involves an indirect or mediated understanding that can only be attained by

placing human expressions in their historical context. He further explains that understanding is not a process of reconstructing the state of mind of the author, but what is expressed in the work ( Makkreel 480). This paper focus on the art of interpretations inculcated by Anita Desai and Gita Hariharan for the accomplishment of women's identity.

Anita Desai's women are in quest for liberty for they are irritated with the marital and social bondages. Female protagonists are burdened with the awareness of their femininity therefore these women struggle to attain liberty from the rigid mould. Shanta Krishnaswami points out that in Desai's novels, "Being a woman is problem. All the rules and restrictions against which little girls chafed and woman grumbled about were designed only to block all routes to escape from the conventional mode of living, from society that beastly tamer..." (258). Her characters embark on a long voyage of contemplation in order to find a meaning of their existence. In an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, Anita Desai explains:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or driven into some extremity of despair, and so, turned against and made a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current; it make no demands, it costs no efforts. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out the great no; who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them. (Hindustan Times 8).

The subordination of women in a culture is symptomatic of hierarchization of social and moral values between the sexes. It symbolises the polarity between activity and passivity, between meek obedience and defiance. David Lodge in his work *Modern Criticism and Theory* explains Cixous's statement that, "A male privilege can be seen in the opposition between activity and passivity. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is coupled with the same opposition: activity/passivity". Woman is often the symbols of passivity. Cixous further explains that, "Either the woman is passive; or she doesn't exist. What is left is unthinkable, unthought of. She does not enter into the opposition; she is not coupled with the father who is coupled with the son" (288). These spurts of women writers accept bravely the challenge of projecting, delineating, analysing and discussing the real status and factual roles of the contemporary Indian women. Desai and Hariharan's emphasis is on the inner experience of the women protagonists while exploring their relationship with the outer world.

Desai presents various female characters in this novel, who are the victims of patriarchal society and mainly the character of a woman Uma, who suffers the most. Though at the end of the novel she realizes her condition and she tried different means and ways to break the patriarchal norms. But it was not enough to strike and cut down the age's long tradition of male domination to gain freedom and liberation. The narrative travels between the two worlds, one of fasting, signifying self denial and suppression of longings, represented by Uma and the other of feasting which stands for freedom which denotes Arun's world. One exists in the traditional family system and the other in the world of Massachusets. Eldest daughter Uma has stayed at home to look after her parents, after two failed marriage; middle child Aruna has a successful marriage and has almost forgotten her roots, and the third child a son named Arun has gone to the US for further studies .Uma being the eldest of the three children had to share the family responsibilities. She struggles to create an identity of her own and live an independent life. She spends her life in fulfilling the demands of her parents while preparation is made to

expand the education of Arun . Due to his birth, the atmosphere of the household changed, Mama is proud to have fulfilled her role of giving birth to a son, Papa is proud to have been able to produce, finally a male offspring. After Arun's birth, Uma lost her right to education also.

Desai portrays the social system with its conservatist customs like dowery, arranged marriage, the gender bias and dominating role of parents. She reinforces the themes like loneliness, withdrawal and isolation. Another character whose identity is submerged in the family is Uma's cousin Anamika. She shows academic brilliance by procuring a scholarship from Oxford which serves as a trump card to secure an opulent marriage proposal. Married to an elderly, grim-faced, apron-stringed husband, she leads an entrapped life at her in-law's place. Anamika's mother-in-law portrays the prominent role played by the mothers of the male children in the Indian society. Mrs. Patton and her daughter are the mirror images of Mama and Uma in the American landscape. Desai presents a panorama of life lived at different levels by the members of a family. But her focal point is Uma and her life from childhood to middle age. It is her own passiveness, non-rebellious attitude and lack of action which fill her life with despair. She wants to escape to Mumbai, but her request is turned down by her father and dominating sister. She submits all her emotions and remained silently in the house. Thus Desai depicts a typical middle class family system of India in which a son is allowed freedom, whereas a daughter is always taught to exercise restraint and denial.

Though her novel explains the situation of a middle class society, her emphasis is more on the inner depths of human experiences rather than on the outer action of her characters. She is concerned with the dilemma of a person who questions the very relevance of his existence in a hostile world. In the extreme condition of the house Uma's hopes bloomed once again when Dr.Dutt offers her work, unfortunately,her father discovered the matter and scolded her. Her eagerness for studies, reading poetry and collection of greeting cards remained unquenched. But she threw away all these passions by her parents. In a patriarchal society a woman is never allowed to grow as an independent and autonomous human being. She is always given a secondary and subservient place in the society. She is always considered as a weak and vulnerable creature that needs protection and patronage at every stage of her life. In the childhood she is protected by her parents; after her marriage protection is given by her husband and in the old age she is taken care by her own children. Uma's mother was also a victim of patriarchal society as she has surrendered her freedom and identity long before when she was married in her sixteen. Now she was of the same opinion for her daughter Uma. In fact it is not only the males but also the females are responsible for the humiliation, exploitation, sufferings and problems of women of the society. This type of attitude makes things even worse and relatively easier for the males to tighten the chains of their domination over women.

Hariharan no longer remains satisfied with woman's passive role as woman and wife expresses her angry protest. Her vision encompasses the whole history of woman's role and edifies the emergence of a true woman who is true to her own self. She traces the battles of woman in her relationships with man and society. Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* is a re-writing of The Arabian Nights' Entertainments, as this text became known in the West via a French translation. The strong claim on the characters dreams and fiction takes place by the frame architecture of the nights, serves as the structuring principle 96 of the novel. In the novel the emphasis is not only on the alluring spell-binding stories of the Shahrzad but also on the

story-telling technique as woman's tradition passes from generation to generation. The legend of Shahryar and Shahrzad invokes to expose the representation of misrepresentation of women but this time not Shahrzad, but her younger sister, accomplice and disciple, Dunyazad takes to storytelling to revive and reinstate the status of her elder sister, Shahrzad.

Dunyazad and Dilshad travel by re-inventing their lives and bodies and in the process mirroring and distorting the reality created by Shahrzad, so that the past and the future are reconstructed by the sheer determination of wishes, dreams and memories of those dreams. When the story concludes, Hariharan portrays Shahrzad as an old woman projecting her voice firmly as a challenge and caution to the young girls: "I fought for myself and yes, for you as well. And you-what will, you do when your turn comes? When the drums roll and the sword blunted with age, the rusty axe, wake up to be freshly sharpened?" (276). Woman, the biologically weaker of the two sexes is oppressed since ancient times by the malefolk. Dilshad starts by telling the tale of Satyasama, the one-eyed Monkey woman. She dedicates herself to exploring every single tree in the city until she chooses an old peepal as her home. While she sits in the peepal tree, she feels lightening. No wise men sit under the tree, but she determines not to leave her home. This incident marks a change in girl's identity. Her right eye is blinded and she develops a power of reasoning and system of values different from those of the city: Her fur was entirely ungroomed on the right side. Her rump was a Matted mess of flattened hair and a torn tuft or two. More important, she suspected it didn't matter. In her bones she felt her beauty had nothing to do with fur or face. All she knew was that it was the moon gazing, the tree she had chosen which lightening would then choose, and the subsequent one-eyedness which had something to do with it. (139) The story of Satyasama challenges the stereotypical view of woman and the male's right to speech and expression. She composes songs and simple child rhymes that she chants in a sing-song voice. The city itself fractures and doubles is divided into the eastwallas and the westwallas, who worship respectively the rising and the setting sun.

The friendship of Dilshad and Dunyazad symbolically challenges the western creative traditions. The novel ends at a very poignant and relevant question by Shahrzad to the young girls: "I fought for myself, and yes, for you as well. And you- what you do when your turn comes? When the drum roll, and the sword blunted with age, the rusty axe, wake up to the freshly sharpened?" (276). The insecurity of woman in the traditional as well as modern patriarchal society gets significance through the character of Dilshad. Dilshad hears that night is dangerous for the travelers particularly for a woman (162). To Dilshad, even "afternoon is dangerous and treacherous" (162). The Sultan tries to avenge all women and every night he marries a new virgin and midnight will be the: It is midnight then, time for the sultan to retire to his marriage bed. Time for the hopeless nightly clamour of virgin's families. A few minutes, and the bride will be stripped to the skin that will be on display just once, its trembling freshness fingered, handled and penetrated so that a few drops of blood may be shed; foreplay for the more definitive act of conquest that dawn will bring. (168). Virginia Woolf points out in *A Room of One's Own* that, "For most of history, Anonymous was a woman" (51). The brothers Shahryar and Shahzaman, both show as holding a sword each: the former a "mere ornament... a grand showy thing of gem-encrusted gold" while the latter holds another "plaything in his hand, an ancient, blood-dripping sword" (5). This scene, described in the text as "self-absorbed" (7) and presents as an archetype of sorts render "shamelessly immortal" (5) not only in art but it is

implied in life as well. Masculinity and violence, 100 becomes hopelessly conjoined in this world of ours. Hariharan explains in the first part that: It is she who holds the scene together. If she stops, if she collapses, if she loses Shahryar's interest or attention, the roof could cave in, and with it, all hope of the city's deliverance, or its sultan's redemption. Sometimes, mid-sentence, Shahrzad pauses as if to take stock of her audience. Her eyes move from Dunyazad on the floor, crouched like a suppliant, to a half-naked, half-believing Shahryar on the bed, to the unseen Zaman, kneeling behind the door, his breath wheezing with impatience as he waits for her to finish. Shahrzad's eyes turn shrewd; she begins again. (7).

Uma is silent, but the females in Hariharan fought for their survival. Shahrzad emerges as an example of a positive reformulation of feminist identities, reversing the traditional victim status of women to a position of empowerment even in the most adverse circumstances. Thus both the writers seem to imply that there are no paradises or heavens. If they prevail, they are only imaginations. In case of Indian women, there is no escape from traditional and conventional system. So the writers urge Indian women to go for a romantic desire for freedom and emancipation from age-old societal norms and prejudices.

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