

## **Ratiocination over Deliberations in the Fiction of Trio- Anita Desai, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Nergis Dalal with special velleity towards relational complexity and ethnocentric intricacy**

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**Dr. Jaya Sharma**

Assistant Professor English Department GLA University, Mathura  
Jaya.sharma@gla.ac.in

9690171308

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to analyze how the trio Anita Desai, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Nergis Dalal etch fragile human relationship in the wake of contemporary maladies creeping in the society. Attenuated emotional bonds, urge for more space, patriarchal subjugation, rifts in understanding eclipse conjugal harmony and nuptial relations. The trio has chosen to give voice to entangled man-woman relations, incompatibility in marriages, cultural ethnocentrism resulting in marital disharmony, alienation, estrangement, East-west Encounter, Identity Crisis, Familial nuances, Pseudo modernism in Indian society, social life and marital dissonance and feministic seclusion. Draught of female manifestations in Indian English Literature culminates with the foray of Anita Desai, Ruth Jhabwala, Kamla Markandey, Sudha Murthy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Bannerjee, Kiran Desai, Nergis Dalal etc. who dribbled it with the clear stream of their expressions. The initiation of female authors enlarged the dimension by giving voice to untold miseries, unheard experiences and unwritten encounters. Disparate streams of the works of the three contemporary writers Nergis Dalal, Anita Desai and Ruth Jhabwala sometimes sparkle with the streak of same themes manifested in different style.

**Key Words:** men women relationship; ethnocentrism; incompatibility; conflict

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Anita Desai, was premier Indian English writer, when the dawn of legendry writers was waiting in the wings. She probes deep into the heart of women and presents before the readers the conflict, the dilemma, the psyche, the state of mind, the contradictions and predicament of these female characters. The female precursor of psychological novels, Anita Desai has given a new form to the female consciousness. Her novels are the peep hole into a woman's heart where one can see the detachment, the alienation and that psychological void which cannot be filled. Her heroines are not bold enough to survive the blow of emotions and find life unbearable. Concentrating mostly on the women sensibility Desai's métier is quest for identity of her

heroines, she is the one whose presence promised new possibilities in the fields of literature on global map assuring a new vista of psychological writing by permeating her way in the heart of woman following suit of Virginia Woolf. Although many people would not classify her as feminist writer yet she has her due to bring into the light the sub-conscious aspects of women. She herself says “Women think I am doing disservice to the feminist movement by writing about women who have no control over their lives. But I was trying, as every writer tries to do, even in fiction, to get at the truth, write the truth. It would have been really fanciful if I had made [for example, in *Clear Light of Day*] Bim and Tara modern-day feminists” (in Griffiths).

She prefers to put forward the swinging man- woman relationship. Description of pathetic plight of women in the patriarchal society has taken a different shape before the readers. Marriage is the union of two different minds sometimes there is adjustment and sometimes maladjustments as man levitates on rationale and logic contrary to his female counterpart who is sentimental and mawkish. For woman to name marriage is to quash everything dear to her heart in the name of happiness of husband and in-laws. She has successfully reflected the traumatic experience of married lives of women in her novels.

Her first novel *Cry, The Peacock* brings before the readers a married couple Maya and Gautama who are poles apart in nature. Their relationship is bound with worn out threads which are frail and tenuous. Maya is sensitive, emotional, tender and touchy while Gautama is practical, rationale and detached. The matrimonial bonds “neither true nor lasting” but “broken repeatedly and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again.” (P. 40 *Cry, The Peacock*). Nothing is common that can help them to live their conjugal life comfortably. Gautama represents that detached nature as was possessed by Lord Buddha and Maya is indulged in living a dreamy life. The ditch is too deep to be filled as Meena Belliappa says- “*The incompatibility of characters stands revealed –Gautama who touches without feeling and Maya who feels even without touching.*” (Belliappa: 26) For Maya death of her pet dog Toto is the heaviest grief but to Gautama it arouses no emotions as- “*It is all over, he had said as calmly as the meditator beneath the sal tree, you need a cup of tea, he had said, showing how little he knew of my misery or of how to comfort me.*” (*Cry, The Peacock*) Maya, the oversensitive, longs for companionship of Gautama, the husband who is much older than her and fails to find it in the dreary sands of feelingless Gautama. “*I tried to explain it to Gautama, stammering with anxiety for now, when his companionship was a necessity. I required his closest understanding. How was I to gain it? We did not even agree on which points, on what grounds, this closeness of mind necessary.*” (*Cry, The Peacock: 19-20*)

Readers witness her gradual devastation from sanity and wisdom search of love and affection of her husband. Finding no solace she falls in the clutches of madness. “*Who is insane? I myself / or the world around me?*” (P. 45) Recalling the prediction of the death of one of them in the fourth year she becomes hysteric and fear of death pricks her “*am I gone insane*” (P 278) The prophecy of albino that one of them will die hovers over him. In this fit of fear of death she paves the way for the demise of her husband. Adverse circumstances dominate over her and she

persuades her husband for a walk on the roof. There she pushes him and kills only due to fear of prophecy.

Relationship of Sita and Raman also suffers from the same detachment and loveless bond. Hollowness of their relationship has its basis in the difference of principles and faith. Their conjugal life swings on double standards. As Uma Bannerjee points out – *“This is not simply a case of an emancipated woman, revolting against the slavish bonds of marriage. It is much more than that. It is a question of the basic truth that is bitter and naked and can neither be hidden nor be halved to suit individuals.”* (Bannerjee: 153)

*Voices in the City* also showcases the theme of maladjustment in marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Ray. The only feeling that they share together is of terrific hatred and prodigious rage. Basis of marriage is financial settlement as Amla says about her father *“he hadn’t quite bargained for mother, just for her houses and tea states.”* (p.205) Their marriage longs for those soft feelings like love, care, affection, Satisfaction which make it successful. His dearest pastime is lying comfortably and drinking. Music is pursuit of wife; the husband does not take interest in it, for him the sweet shehanai is like a noisy pipe. Her wife’s love for nature is also something beyond his vista of understanding. He taunts and makes fun of her by saying his daughter to look at a butterfly and ‘forget yourself in that study’.

Monisha and Jiban also exhibits the maladjustment in marriage. Yet another marriage for reputation, but her transformation after marriage from a calm, sensible, sensitive girl into a barren, diary- writing woman who is devoid of compassion is detestable for herself. Her loneliness pricks her as she feels trapped. Callous attitude of her in-laws is unbearable for her, her sterility has also become a curse which constantly goads her. She is unable to cope up with circumstances and at last finding no way out leaves herself in the lap of flames and commits suicide. Relationship of Dharma and Amla is also on the same footing. Amla who is attracted towards Dharma in the beginning becomes disappointed after knowing his real self. Amla longs for permanence in their relation but that was absent.

*“The understanding between them was an interior volcano, colouring the water of his existence and splashing on to his canvas the tints of the upheaval within him.”* (*Voices in the City*: 212) Amla gets nothing from the marriage, no peace, no happiness, no satisfaction at heart and at last the ill nurtured bond of their relation breaks and they are separated.

Her novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is also no exception for the theme. Relationship of Adit and Sarah is dependent on hypocrisy and pretension. Outward mask of being a happy couple does not give intrinsic peace and happiness. Constant mockery by her own people and maladjustment causes uninhibited tension for Sarah, who is an English girl. Adit runs up annoyance of English society by breaking social code of conduct, but it is Sarah who suffers a lot as she has to face the indifference of her own people. She is constantly under tension as anxiety and insecurity hovers over her. She herself feels, *“who was she? . . . Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume.”* (*Bye-Bye, Blackbird*: 39) Samar and Bella are also sailing in the same boat. Their

marriage is an instance of different culture maladjustment. As the novelist says about both of the couples “*Two Indian, two English women frozen in the stances of players on the stage who had not been told what to do next. Somewhere in a locked closet, a slab of marble like a black grave stone awaiting and engraving a grave, a bunch of flowers.*” (*Bye-Bye, Blackbird: 188*)

Another theme taken up by Anita Desai is **extra marital affair**. She has shown how the canker of this type of relationship gnaws not only the spouse but also the whole family. In *Voice in the City* Monisha and Nirode are the worst sufferers. They cannot bear relationship of their mother with Dr. Chaddha and feel alienation. Their better instincts are killed. In ‘*Fire on the Mountain*’ Nanda Kaul suffers lifelong punishment of living a suffocated, fake life of subjugation as her husband has relationship with Miss David. Neither can she reveal nor can she endure and pretends only to have a happy married life while confining herself to household chores. The anguish of Nanda Kaul, the duress to have the façade of happiness in spite of the hollowness of the conjugal relation. For outward show Mr. and Mrs. Kaul are happy couple but for Nanda the canker of alienation and loneliness gnaws all happiness because she has to bear his affair with a smile on her face. Her seclusion from the outer world is a safety valve which she has adopted to remain sane as throughout life she has the exterior that was forced on her. It was only the exercise to hide her wounds. Her Granddaughter Tara also suffers from the same loneliness and nervous breakdown as she is forced to marry Rakesh and there is yet another maladjusted marriage. The worst outcome is their daughter Raka who has twisted personality as she never gets the loving touch of love of her parents.

She has very skillfully transcribed the phantasmagoria of her touchy heroines. Desai is precursor of psychological novels in Indian English writing and her novels are called forte of poetic sensibility as they mirror the heartfelt tension of the characters. Her writing marks a vital phase in the growth of novels in Indian English Literature. Meena Belliappa calls, “*the gradual shift from the external world to the inner world of the individual.*” because they “*capture the atmosphere of the mind and directly involve the reader in the flow of a particular consciousness.*” In all her novels she probe deep into the psyche of people and takes the inner heart out. Her novels present a unique innovation of combining novel with lyrical poetry.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is a writer who has been caught in the controversy whether to regard her as Indian English writer or not. She is a German born British and American Novelist. Vibha Sharma has eulogized her by saying that no survey of contemporary Indian literary scene would be complete if it failed to take note of the writings of Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Her novels are macerated in various themes as East-west Encounter, Identity Crisis, familial nuances, Pseudo modernism in Indian society, social life and marital dissonance, post independent Indian flavour. She has very efficiently dived deep into the heart, sensibility and mind of the lonely women. Her writings may be divided into two well defined broad category- comedies of urban middle class Indian life of undivided Hindu families and east west encounter. The First group is represented by the novels as- *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *The Householder*

(1960) etc. The second group comprises- *A Backward Place* (1961), *A New Dominion* (1973), *Heat and Dust* (1975).

She is considered to be an “outsider with unusual insight”. Khushwant Singh identifies her as “a fine interpreter of contemporary India in Fiction”. Her reflections on the post independent middle class in her novels brings before the readers the problems and domestic existence of them. Her exhibition of unique sensibility is totally different from the foreign writers passing from India and native Indian writers as she has the vantage of observing things with detachment. By virtue of her different background she brings a new viewpoint and discipline to Indian English writing. Her unique perspective is the result of her rootless cosmopolitan living.

Jhabvala’s work is mainly concerned with the postcolonial expatriation of Europeans who were caught between two cultures, one of Indian traditions and customs which they were leaving and the other which has not assimilated them yet. She mainly concentrates her works around female characters that are displaced and struggle to search for their own identity. The juxtaposition of different cultures highlights different themes in her novels. Westerners are attracted towards India for various purposes, interests and dreams. Some of them are adjusted but the others remain alien and find it hard to cope up in different ambience. Her novel ‘*A Backward Place*’ is steeped in this encounter as for Clarissa India is her ideal. This country of Ramakrishna and Vivekanand is overflowing with energy which needs to be channelized. The excessive materialism of the west has exhausted them and they find a soothing gusto of spirituality permeated in India. Being impressed by this rich culture Clarissa comes to India.

Man-woman relationship, the indispensable aspect of literature is the basis of her novel. Most of the novels reveal the theme of marital disharmony. *Heat and Dust* for which she has won Booker prize shows marital dissonance in the relation of Olivia and Douglas in cross cultural aspect. Olivia’s romantic life full of imagination is contrasted by practicality and rationality of Douglas who thinks material comforts provided to the wife as the sufficient ends to make her happy. He is unable to realize and notice that psychological void which she feels in the core of her heart. This lacking on the part of Douglas distracts her towards the Nawab and she begins to enjoy the company of Nawab as she says to Harry- “*I come here to be with you- and him of course- I mean, as your friend –both of you.*” (P102) Nirmal Mukerji observes- “*Olivia is destroyed because she is the most vulnerable. She who is sensitive, Passionate, human and aesthetic is destroyed, whereas the ‘tough old hens’ like Mrs. Crawford and Mrs. Minnie survive.*” ( P.122 *Heat and Dust : A Study of Two Woman Kakatiya Journal of English Studies,3 no 1 1978*) The Householder also reflects the hardships of Prem to live smooth marital life. Esmond in India is also in the line of *Heat and Dust* revealing incompatibility on the part of husband and wife resulting in dissonance in marital relation. Incongruity of characters, incompatibility of behaviour is so dominant that they are alienated.

In her novel *Esmond in India* she again talks about incongruous marital relation of Esmond and Gulab. The things which Esmond likes are horse of another colour for Gulab. Their love marriage becomes a burden for both of them when the third stage arrives in the life in *Esmond in*

*India*. Ruth speaks of the cycle of emotions of the European living in India. According to her the first stage tremendous enthusiasm, everything Indian is marvelous; Second stage, everything Indian not so very marvelous; third stage everything Indian abominable. Esmond passes all the three stages and yearns to go back to his country. The disharmony is conspicuous in their point of view as the readers visualize from the point of view of Esmond and then from Gulab. The rationalism of husband is contrasted by the emotionalism of wife. Ruth has tried to bring into light all the side effects which come in trail with East- West encounter as alienation, marital disharmony, identity crisis, love without marriage and marriage without love, traditionalism vs. modernism.etc. She is successful in depicting all these successfully as she herself lives in her adopted country and has felt the same emotion as those of her characters. Esmond faces identity crisis. As the time passes the enchantment of India breaks, Esmond no longer likes Gulab and searches for his own identity. He is bored and trapped in a country to which he does not belong. *“His senses revolted at the thought of her, of her greed and smell and languor, her passion for meal and spices and strong perfumes. She was everywhere, everywhere he felt her.”*(2 *Esmond in India*) Cultural disparity can allure people but for the long term relationship there is requirement of congruity that is absent in the relationship.

The female heart of Jhabvala could not keep herself away from feminist writing. She has also raised the issues of feminine sensibilities. It is a universally accepted truth that a lot of women in the world speak the same language of silence, suppression, suffocation, suffering and struggle. The female protagonists of Ruth like Judy, Olivia, Lara, Elsa all are sexually misused stooges who dance on the tune of magnetic womanizers fulfilling their elemental passion even at the cost of their lives. The heroines of Jhabvala share these aspects of their character with every woman. She also shows the ancillary position of Indian women. Thoughts of Lala Narayan Das about the marriage of his daughter Nimmi exhibit the same-*“A Woman is woman and her duties of a man ..... It is a woman’s fate to leave the house of her father and to go to a husband’s house, to bear his children, to look to the comforts of his family.”* (P. 112 *The Nature of Passion*)

Her novels also present post colonial Indian ethos. *“To Whom She Will”* mirrors the Indian society in the wake of Independence.

Man-woman relationship has not lost its vitality in the novels of Dalal also. She has shown the separate culture maladjustment in her novel *‘Skin Deep’* where JJ marries a foreigner for whom to adjust in a Parsi family especially with typical Parsi mother-in-law, brings disharmony in the relationship of husband- wife. Relation of Naaz and Ramesh is also on the basis of need only where Naaz marries due to attraction; Ramesh marries for the reason that money of Naaz can bring happiness to their family. Their marriage which can be said to be on the term of convenience comes to be broken as Ramesh falls in romantic love with his own sister-in-law. All the sacrifices and all the ordeals, endured by Naaz culminates in the statement of Ramesh in asking for divorce. The whole story of convenience and comfort ends in the same anguish tolerated by woman only. Instead of succumbing to the circumstances she finds her way out. Another couple Anita and Ranjan cannot be said to be as happy. Disharmony and maladjustment hovers here also. Anita who has high ideas of marital life, is unable to bear too much

involvement of her husband in the business of tea-state. She feels neglected and complains again and again. Like Sita she also wants to run away from her home. She also suffers from father fixation. Over busy schedule of her husband, reserved nature, simple attitude is contradictory to her romantic, oversensitive nature as on her birthday she expects lavish gifts rolled in love like she used to get before marriage but Ranjan forgets her birthday. She doesn't get what her romantic nature requires of him.

While talking about man-woman relationship they are conscious about marital discord, extra marital affairs, vitiated relations, infidelity, domestic violence and exploitation of female. *Cry, The Peacock* by Anita Desai shows how incongruous relation lugs a happy, lively life towards her predicament of suicide. Anita in *Minari* by Nergis Dalal Searches for her own identity and is distracted towards a womanizer Tejpore to fulfil her needs. Olivia, a girl from Overseas in *Heat and Dust* by Jhabvala also finds life boring and writes her own predicament. Emotion on the part of woman and reason on the part of male procreate clashes and the dreamy heart of woman find it hard to bear.

Theme of East- West Encounter as reflected in the novels of all the three novelists indicates the same vision that "*Separate cultures should remain separate. Although human beings have their own personal lives they are yet in some measure the victims and promoters of a collective spirit, whose years, according to Jung, are counted in centuries.*" ( P.101 *The Girls from Overseas*) All the five heroines in the novel *The Girls from Overseas* are caught between two cultures, one western, excessively inclined towards physical comfort and materialism and the other Eastern swayed towards emotional and spiritual pursuits.

In her novel *A Backward Place* Jhabvala also portrays the maladjustment on the part of western ladies who come to India. Although Judy adjusts herself, Etta is in the worst conditions and share the same feelings as Jhabvala – "*We may praise Indian democracy, go into raptures over Indian music, admire Indian intellectuals- but whatever we say, not for a moment should we lose sight of the fact that a very great number of Indians never get enough to eat ....can one lose sight of the fact?*" ( P8 *Myself in India in An Experience* London: John Murray )

Rootless stay of the foreigner in India and of the Indian who has become too westernized to feel at home with his own people, the clash between the old and the new... all call for Jhabvala's attention which is devoid of any malevolence. With her touch of sympathetic description even the most satiric situation is subsidized. *Bye Bye Blackbird* by Anita Desai also scrutinizes the East-West Encounter and the consequences of it. Sarah, an English woman has to lose her identity, her culture, and her people when she is attracted to marry a Bengali youth Adit. Her loneliness, her alienation, her detachment after these results in her being anaemic and depressed.

*Neeru Chakraverty says- "In contrast to her husband's intimacy with his group of friends, Sarah is characterized by alienation, lone lines send a sense of entrapment. ....rather the narrative stresses her total isolation even in her own country.( Chakraverty, Neeru. "Identity, Exile and Alienation", Quest of Self Fulfillment in the Novels of Anita Desai, Delhi, Authorpress, 2003, p. 124)*

All the three novelists have the same streak of opinion that the perceptions of these foreign women are conditioned by their own culture and they have their own cultural affiliation and ethnocentrism to assess others by their own values and beliefs which hinders in adjustment. These writers also have similarity of opinion that the root of the crisis of human being is traced in his or her childhood experience. In *Skin Deep* by Nergis Dalal Naaz' s bleak childhood which is filled with partial attitude of everyone even of her mother has indelible impact on her later life. "A happy childhood imprints itself on the rest of one's life. Without this, people do recover, but the scars remain forever." (P.154 *Skin Deep*) She shudders to hear when she herself is conceived with twins. In *Cry, The Peacock*, Maya is also unable to adjust due to her over pampered childhood and expects the same fatherly affection from her husband.

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