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Dr. Vinay Kumar Sharma
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MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP : A STUDY OF ANITA DESAI'S 'IN CUSTODY'

Manoj Kumar Kalita*

ABSTRACT

Anita Desai presents the problem of man-woman relationship in her novels in a very delicate manner. The theme of love and marriage, husband-wife alienation and marital discord gains depth and meaning in the novel. Anita Desai in her portrayal of man-woman relationship mostly concentrates on the predicament of modern women in the patriarchal society and her destruction at the altar of marriage. According to Desai, most of the marriages prove to be unions of incompatibility. Anita Desai's female protagonists point out the mad clarity of all family relationships, the farcical nature of all marriages, the illusory quality of all human relationship, male or female. Desai portrays the suffered rebellion against the entire system of social relationships. Desai always deals with the question of real love in her novels. The portrayal of man-women relationships in a patriarchal society reveals her concerns and understanding of different forms of woman's experiences through an effective interplay of motive and the medium. Desai's *In Custody* reflects this post-marital disharmony between wife and husband and shows how both wife and husband tries to rebel against their disappointment. This paper explores the theme of man-woman relationship in Anita Desai's *In Custody*.

Keywords : Marriage, Relationship, Love, Disharmony, Wife, Husband

Anita Desai presents the thematic problem of man-woman relationship in her novels in a very delicate manner. The theme of love and marriage, husband-wife alienation and marital discord gains depth and meaning in her novels. Feminist author Simon de Beauvoir says 'Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society'. Anita Desai in her portrayal of man-woman relationship mostly concentrates on the predicament of modern women in the patriarchal society and her destruction at the altar of marriage. According to Desai, most of the marriages prove to be unions of incompatibility. Desai's women hanker after love and communion of the spirit which they perceive as the panacea of the ills of the present world. In almost all the novels of Anita Desai, all the women protagonists are lonely and dissatisfied in their marital life except in the *Voices of the City*. Anita Desai's protagonist experiences a lot of suffering in life. In fact, Anita Desai's interest is in

the characters who are not average but who have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general current.' (Dalmia, 26)

Anita Desai has presented in her novels the predicament of sensitive women characters, who find it very difficult to adjust in the present mechanical and urbanised set-up. She sincerely broods over the fate and future of modern women. She has explored different aspects of feminine psyche like man-woman dichotomy, their personal relations, presentation of neurotic characters, etc. In fact, most of her novels are study of feminine psyche, which comprises women of all ages. Anita Desai freely employs images and symbols in her novels to reveal the inner psychology of the women characters and illuminated their obsession changing and contrasting moods, and psychic deviation besides emphasizing the obscure and weird atmosphere of her

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tale. (Tandon, 46)

The novel 'In Custody' describes the problem of Deven Sharma who is an impoverished college lecturer. After his marriage with Sarla, a sullen and dull lady, Deven finds a way to escape from the hopelessness of the daily life. Deven is a temporary lecturer in a private college but he lives in a fool's paradise. He was addicted to art and his extreme devotion to art leads him to be indifferent to his wife Sarla. Deven cultivated an aversion to and dislike for his wife. He rather lets his wife feel widowed. The relationship between Sarla and Deven is not satisfactory and for this Sarla withdraws into silence. In the novel Anita Desai deals with a purely marital problem prevalent in a materialistic city like Delhi where the relationship between wife and husband is always under strain because of the undue indulgence of husbands in extra activities as well as for his attachment with other women.

Apart from this the dilapidated house also reflects on Deven's uncongenial and less harmonious ties of life. It reveals the isolation and conjugal chaos leading to insanity. Deven and Sarla do not be able to get happiness. They are leading their lives on their own way but they are unable to do anything. They feel marriage to be a trap, a cage and there was no way out of it. Deben wanders in search of money only. He craves for named dreams of gold bangles of his wife. He plans for a utopian world for them. But Sarla is puzzled by these dreams of Deven. How can a wife love her husband who, loves others, have ties with them but maintain a distance from his wife and son. Thus, problems of post-marital life are delt in this novel. Deven is not happy with his marriage, rather he feels his marriage like a heavy weight. He believes that marriage has clogged his progress in life and marriage has given hostage to his festive and marriage has placed him in such a cage from where he can never escape. It is nothing but a common thinking of the impoverished husbands. Deven feels dejected. But had he shown his love and affection for his wife and children, he would have led a very happy and satisfied life. But it never happened and consequently the husband feeling of his heart is never true to his wife in the real sense of the term. In his relation with his wife, there is nothing but only lack

of agreement, tuning and concordance.

In the novel 'In Custody' Anita Desai presents a kind of humour and pathos of married relations. Marriage is basically a means of unification of two soul and two bodies into spiritual harmony. But Deven's married life does not give better and sweeter results. Sarla is a pessimistic lady and she presents the picture of an ill-matched wife. This makes Deven feel aged and haunted. As a husband Deven could never understand that as a wife Sarla needs love and affection more than money. He could never understand the hunger of Sarla for Deven's love, sympathy, appreciation of her work and sharing of pain and happiness with her husband. Deven does not understands his wife and her motives and intentions and likewise Sarla also does not understand Deven. Deven thinks that Sarla does not care for him and his feelings while Sarla thinks that Deven neglects her all the time and is engaged with other girls. Both Deven and Sarla feel insulted and humiliated living in a single bedroom. This mismatch between the two characters leads to marital disharmony in the novel. 'Deven had been more a poet than a Professor when he married Sarla- he had only been taken on as a temporary lecturer and still had confidence in his verse- and for the wife of a poet she seemed too prosaic'. (Desai, 75)

However, there is another aspect of marital relationship in the novel. Deven thinks about his wife and son all the time. He wants to earn money for Sarla. He wishes to purchase gold jewellery for his wife. Sarla too tries to fulfil her duties as a wife and mother when Deven needs support. Sarla gave him some herbal tea to drink and went off to fetch some powders from the homoeopath in the bazaar. Sarla feels happy as a mother when she finds Deven spending time with Manu.

The major reason behind the failure of their marital harmony is that it was a settled marriage and not a love marriage. Love was no where to be seen in their relationship. Nobody from Deven's side could understand that Sarla as a girl and as a new bride had aspirations, too. Sarla had many aspirations in her life. But by marrying into the academic profession with a lecturer of Hindi, none of her dreams materialized and that made her naturally embittered. Deven was also

disappointed as he is depicted as a victim but at least he had his poetry, while Sarla had nothing and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look. Sometimes she becomes sarcastic in tone while talking to Deven. Deven's miserable life with unsympathetic and sarcastic wife makes him feel like a caged animal in a zoo.

In the novel 'In Custody', Anita Desai shows another aspect of man-woman relationship shown by Nur and his two wives. While his elder wife stands for duty, the second wife stands for love. Nur and Imtiaz Begum do care for each other to the certain extent. Nur wanted to admit Imtiaz Begum to a hospital for her treatment but she refuses the hospitalization due to illness because she feels that she will be deprived of her husband's care and nursing. Likewise, Nur also wishes to nurse her. Nur even refuses to give interview to Deven due to the illness of Imtiaz Begum. This represents an enormous wife-husband attachment.

Anita Desai's female protagonists points out the mad clarity of all family relationships, the farcical nature of all marriages, the illusory quality of all human relationship, male or female. Desai portrays the suffered rebellion against the entire system of social relationships. Desai always deals with the question of real love in her novels. The portrayal of man-women relationships in a patriarchal society reveals her concerns and understanding of different forms of woman's experiences through an effective interplay of motive and the medium. The women in the novel *In Custody* seem to be malicious. As the male characters are trapped in an unsuccessful world, the female characters feel frustrated within a patriarchal society that reduces them to clinging to these men who fail to provide them what they want. Deven's wife Sarla neglects Deven and feels annoyed at his failures. All her dreams of a luxurious life are dashed to the ground because of his low income. But the way she protests is nothing more than a symbolic disappointment with her luck. Sarla never lifted her voice in his presence and for this reason it was difficult for Deven to handle her. 'Sarla never lifted her voice in his presence- countless

generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would scream and abuse only when she was safely out of the way, preferably in the kitchen, her own domain. Her other method of defence was to go into the bedroom and snivel, refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wail in sympathy.' (Desai, 169)

Anita Desai's female characters are reflective above their position. They are rebellious. They protest just for the right to be acknowledged as individuals and to get their due place in the family and society. (Agarwal, 142) In her previous novels, women characters were of poetic temperament and male characters were cold and calculating: Maya-Gautam, Monisha-Jiban, and Sita-Raman, all represent such couples. But *In Custody* shows the reverse of it. Imtiaz Begum and Sarla mock at the poetic sensibilities of their husbands because they fail to meet their corporal needs. Thus Anita Desai has conveyed her women character's fundamental dependence on men through her lexicon and types of mastery, command and domination. Anita Desai always tries to discover, and then to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of things throughout her writings. She gives her opinion about the intricacy of man-women relationships as a big contemporary issue.

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