

Portrayal of Mother – Son Relationship in Anita Desai’s *Voices in the City* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* -A Comparative Study

Dr. Deexa Tiwari

Lecturer, U.P.U Govt. Polytechnic, Durg-491001 (C.G)
E-mail: deexatiwari4@gmail.com

Abstract—Women have been hailed various roles-daughter, sister, wife and mother. Among all these, the role of a mother is considered to be the most matured and challenging. The nature and behavior of a mother can shape up or destroy the personality of her child, especially, of her son. Mother-son relationship is one of the most pious and promising relationship. This relationship portrays a strong bond of love between the two creatures of God. In our Indian context, a mother is hailed above the God, regarding the love and care she shares with her child. The tender age of a boy is directly affected by his mother’s role –power and devotion for the family.

Indian women writers, like, Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy have presented a contrast picture of mother-son relationship in their works. In Anita Desai’s novel *Voices in the City*, a son is seen to have a strong mother-fixation. Anita Desai’s *Voices in the City* presents before us the miserable plight of a son (Nirode), a son who is hurt and feels himself bereaved from his mother’s love, but, at the end of the novel regains true love for his mother.

In contrary, Arundhati Roy’s novel, *The God of Small Things* shows women being tortured and humiliated at the hands of men. Even the most sacred relationship between a mother and a child is not free from the sense of selfishness. It shows lack of affection, especially of a son for his mother which is in contrast to the novels of Anita Desai.

Keywords: Relationship, Gratitude, Miserable Plight, Hailed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women have been hailed various roles-daughter, sister, wife and mother. Among all these, the role of a mother is considered to be the most matured and challenging. Mother is regarded to be the first and the most significant personality in a child’s life. Carl Gustav Jung described the importance of mother, in his notable work, *Four Archetypes* as:

This is the mother-love which is one of the most moving and unforgettable memories of our lives, the mysterious root of all growth and change; the love that means homecoming, shelter and the long silence from which everything begins and everything ends. (28)

Thus, Jung declared mother to be the most familiar and loving creature of the world, an untiring giver of life and therefore, occupying the most special place in the life of a child.

2. PORTRAYAL OF MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIP IN ANITA DESAI’S VOICES IN THE CITY

Anita Desai in her novel, *Voices in the City* presents the strange relationship between Nirode and his mother, Otima. Nirode loves his mother so intensely, that he is psychologically disturbed later on. He is not in good terms with his father, as the father himself was an acute drunkard, an irresponsible man. He knows the incompatible relationship between his parents. The sudden death of his father gives him an opportunity to be with his mother and understand her. But, he is surprised to see his mother’s reaction on seeing the dead body of her husband. “...So much contempt and resentment that she seemed to forget herself in this passion” (29). To Nirode the degree of his mother’s hatred for her husband seems to be both surprising and unacceptable. Further, he is shocked to learn the role and importance of their neighbour, the old and the retired brigadier, Major Chadha in her life. He is surprised to see his mother’s reaction on seeing the Major coming, while she was sitting beside her husband’s dead body and “turned to greet with a ravishing smile” (Desai 29). The male –chauvinism in Nirode fails to tolerate the lack of sanctity of a wife for her husband. The incompatibility between his parents, that had spoiled the atmosphere of the family and further, the extra-marital affair of his mother, makes Nirode hate his mother. Usha Pathania in *Human Bonds and Bondages: The Fiction of Anita Desai and Kamla Markandaya*, declares that the incompatible relationship between Nirode and his mother is “an off-shoot of dissonance in the husband-wife relationship” (115). Nirode being a child has seen the mismatched marriage between his parents and has learnt only the presence of neglect and humiliation in man-woman relationship. He feels betrayed. His mother never shares her sorrows and secrets with him. Anita Desai here has

reflected the negative aspects of the mother archetype, propounded by Carl Gustav Jung that directly affects the life of the son. Jung described that, she has negative qualities like secret, hidden, dark and abyss in her approach and action. This incidence makes Nirode utterly shattered and he clamps away. The separation with his mother makes him aggressive towards everyone. In *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck described it as the story of the human soul and remarks: (sic)

The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell of fears. I think everyone in the world to a large or small extent has felt rejection. And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with crime, guilt—and there is the story of mankind. (268)

Nirode in the novel experiences rejection from his parents that develops anger within him. He, like a small child, gets utterly shattered to learn that his mother’s love is not for him but for the Major, a stranger. Jaydip Sinh Dodiya in *Critical Essays on Anita Desai’s Fiction* comments that “Nirode’s love-hate relationship with the mother has marked oedipal tendencies. He imagines a rival in his mother’s friend Major Chadha whom he considers coming in his way of winning the mother’s affection exclusively for himself” (64). The oedipal tendencies, developed in Nirode is reflected in the novel through his action, speech and behaviour. He does not have good terms with anyone. Sigmund Freud, an eminent psychologist, signifies that a boy, who develops an Oedipal Complex, cannot accept her unusual behaviour and action. If, in any case, this feeling is broken, then it can ruin the person. Nirode, being away from his mother, fails to succeed in his life. He grows to be an anonymous and a shabby clerk of a newspaper and calls himself a journalist. But, in reality he remains a sinking ship, aggressive and frustrated. He blames his mother for his miserable plight. Even while he hates her, deep within the heart he has a deep love and longing for her.

Anita Desai in the novel has portrayed a strong bond of love and belongingness between a mother and a son. If Nirode feels his life incomplete in the absence of his mother, his mother too feels the pain of being away from Nirode. She writes letters to Nirode without any fail. She refers to Nirode as her ‘golden son’ to express her deep love for him. She takes help of Monisha to convey her feelings to Nirode, telling him about the circumstances, which compelled their mother to associate with Major Chadha. She, through her letters, conveys Monisha that she has opened a bank account for Nirode with the help of Major Chadha as she wants to see her son enjoying his life, without any worries. She also expresses her dreams, to see the way she wants Nirode to dress and eat. She openly declares that it would have not been possible with a drunkard and irresponsible man. Nirode’s ego is hurt and he refuses to sign the cheque blaming his mother for all the misunderstanding between them. When Nirode comes to know of Amla’s intimacy with Dharma, he is reminded of his mother with

Major Chadha and believes that his mother has killed their father “like a cobra swallows a fat, petrified rat” (Desai 188). In his anger he forgets that his father remained like a slow poison in their life. Monisha’s submission to death by committing suicide opens Nirode’s eyes. He realises that there is no reason to hate his mother who withstood all the odds of her life boldly, and not committed suicide like Monisha. Hatred for his mother is transformed into love and appreciation for her. Nirode shows a new confidence in his mother when he consoles Amla and Aunt Mira, after Monisha’s death saying, “mother will come tomorrow...She’ll understand, aunt. Don’t worry, don’t cry. Sleep a little” (Desai 247). Nirode willingly goes to fetch his mother from the airport and like an innocent child trembles with fear when he encounters her. He is surprised to learn that she is still beautiful. He can at this moment feel all the positive qualities of mother described by Carl Jung -beautiful, bold, religious, superior and magical, in her. He stands speechless and fails to stop himself from expressing his love for her. The happy reunion of Nirode and his mother at the end signifies the unbreakable bond between mother and son.

3. PORTRAYAL OF MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIP IN ARUNDHATI ROY’S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

Arundhati Roy’s novel, *The God of Small Things* shows women being tortured and humiliated at the hands of men. Even the most sacred relationship between a mother and a child is not free from the sense of selfishness. It shows lack of affection, especially of a son for his mother which is in contrast to the novels of Anita Desai. In Anita Desai’s novels, a son is seen to have a strong mother-fixation. But in Arundhati Roy’s novel there is no such feeling that keeps a mother and a son united. There is no reference in the novel that depicts the relationship between Pappachi and his mother, Aleyooty Ammachi. But there is a clear reference in the novel that shows that Pappachi’s mother lived as a mute, docile woman under the domination of his father, Reverend. John Ipe.

In the novel the relationship between Mammachi and her son Chacko is dealt in detail. Mammachi is brutally tortured at the hands of her husband Pappachi. Her daughter Ammu fails to do anything for her. It is with the arrival of Chacko that Mammachi becomes free from the physical overtures of her husband. Chacko, who happens to be at home during his vacation from Oxford University stands in support of his mother. One day when he happens to see his father beating his mother with the brass-flower vase, Chacko strides into the room and twists his father’s hand and roars, “I never want this to happen again” (Roy 48). Chacko who has been fortunate enough to be away from the patriarchal atmosphere of his home fails to see brutality inflicted on his mother by his father. This event strengthens Mammachi’s love for Chacko. She has never enjoyed the marital bliss in the company of her

over-dominating, short –tempered and jealous husband. Chacko takes up the place of Pappachi in his mother’s heart –“the man of her dreams and from then onwards Mammachi packed her wifely luggage and committed it to Chacko’s care” (Roy 168). She decides to spend rest of her life to serve him.

Being unsuccessful to establish himself and having divorced Margaret Kochamma, his English wife, Chacko decides to shift to Ayemenem forever. He soon sensed his mother’s weakness for him and started taking due and undue advantage of it. Seeing his mother’s blind faith on him, he declares himself the owner of the Pickle factory and his mother the ‘sleeping partner’. His mother, who has decided to submit her life to serve Chacko, also accepts his English ex-wife Margaret Kochamma. But Mammachi feels jealous to see the efforts taken by Chacko to impress Margaret. In *Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel*, Meena Shirwadkar discusses the discomfort experienced by a mother to see the concern of her son for her daughter-in-law:

As a son’s mother an Indian woman enjoys a high position in the family. When the son’s wife comes the son is likely to follow the wishes of his wife. The mother is generally unwilling to allow the son to go under her daughter-in-law’s power. To that end, she devises various ways to keep him in power or else she harasses the daughter-in-law. (101)

Mammachi’s strong fixation on her son makes her to accept Margaret, and her visits to Ayemenem. But Chacko’s special treatment towards Margaret hurt her. She is happy when Margaret leaves Ayemenem.

Mammachi in her partial behaviour has special concern for Sophie Mol, Chacko’s daughter and she hates Estha and Rahel, Ammu’s twins. She is seen aware of Chacko’s libertine relationship with the women in the factory. But, she bursts in anger to learn Ammu-Velutha relationship. Chacko on the other hand receives full support from the members of his family, especially, of his mother. When Mammachi’s sister-in-law, Baby Kochamma, tells Mammachi about Chacko’s illicit relationship with the women in the factory, Mammachi gives a bold reply saying “He can’t help having a Man’s needs...” (Roy 168). Chacko’s mother thus, develops the attitude of ‘let go’ for Chacko and encouraged him by maintaining a secret back door entry to his room. Mammachi,

even, offers money and small gifts to women exploited by Chacko. For Ammu, Mammachi decides to stand against her daughter’s wish and punished her by indirectly showing her the way out of her house. Binayak Roy in his article, “The Title of *The God of Small Things*: A Subversive Salvo”, comments on Mammachi that “Mammachi is another Big Woman who deifies her son Chacko and despises her daughter Ammu” (56-63). Her blind faith in Chacko makes her helpless and she fails to realize the ill intention of her son. Mammachi always wants Chacko to live with her but Chacko has no such feelings for his mother. He has only come back to his mother because he has been declared unsuccessful in whatever he does –marriage, job etc. He even fails to keep up the good name of his mother’s factory and finally moves to Italy, leaving his mother at Ayemenem.

A clear contrast is visible in portraying the mother-son relationship by the two novelists. Anita Desai’s novels give a positive message that the bond between a mother and a son may get loose due to some forced circumstances but cannot be broken. Both the son and the mother shares an intense love that keeps them united. Arundhati Roy’s novel reflects a sense of dependency and selfishness in mother-son relationship.

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