

# Sex and Gender as a Social Phenomenon in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai and Jeanette Winterson

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**Abstract-Sex and gender are very important social phenomena and that is created by society. Literature has explored various aspects of sex and gender and establishes the difference between gender identity and interpretation of gender from the viewpoint of sexuality. Biologically, sex and gender are two disparate phenomena. Sex is the biological characteristics of a particular human being and gender is the psychological approach to the physical attributes. Sex is essentially an adamant concept of contemporary biology, while gender is the apprehension of inner feelings. Gender is more of a concept about sexual categories and interpretation of self-identity. Literature has explored both of these existences and has tried to provide experience to individual readers about how sex and gender react as a social phenomenon.**

## INTRODUCTION

When society is divided in various stratas, and there are extreme levels of aggression and passivity towards elements of sex and gender, various articles and stories help individuals to understand the demarcation between dominance, subordination and nurturing. Literature constructs social expectations and gives personal references. The various literary works create a basic level of acceptance in society about the identities of sex and gender. Literature can construct alternative realities and provide a glimpse into the world of various sex and gender identities. Writers have explored several layers of human experiences and tried to identify the multi-faceted layers of sex and identity in the contemporary world.

Jeanette Winterson and Anita Desai are two important writers of 21<sup>st</sup> century who have explored the identities of sex and gender as social phenomena in their writings. It is significant to identify and analyze their work. Various stories and novels by Jeanette Winterson and Anita Desai help the reader to

understand what is sex and gender as a social phenomenon and their characters create a world of self-realization and understanding.

Jeanette Winterson is one of the most celebrated English authors who had written extensively about sex and gender identities in her novels. Her first book *Oranges are not the only fruit* is a semi-autobiographical novel where the protagonist rebels against conventions. Winterson has created a world of her characters that identifies sexuality and gender polarities along with interpersonal relationship between human beings. She has a special eye for feminine understanding. Her lady characters are always protesting against convention and she subsequently increases her boundaries of physicality and imagination. She narrates her work to give experience of various identities with the reader and consequently she develops realization that every individual is special in his own world and manner.

Anita Desai is a renowned novelist of Indian origin and the Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is a Sahitya Akademi award winning writer whose stories and writings have explored various sex and gender dimensions. She has been the fellow of Royal Society of Literature in London and has extensively travelled the world. All her writings have gained analysis of gender and sexual identities and the roles of individual in contemporary society. She has created various rebel characters and has reached out to various individuals with these stories and characters to develop her own world of Gender and sexual understanding as a social phenomenon

Jeanette Winterson's renowned novel is *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. The novel was first published in the year 1985 by Pandora Press, London. It is a semi-autobiographical novel in which she names the

protagonist of the novel after herself. Jeanette was adopted by evangelists of the Elim Pentecostal Church and was growing up among the Pentecostal community. The novel addresses her grown-up life as well as her sexuality during her adolescent times. Being born in a religious environment she thinks that she should become a missionary through which she would be able to spread religious righteousness and inspired words of Christianity among the devotees and people of her community. However, as she grows up and understands her sexuality and feeling of gender and love, she gets attracted towards another girl. Thus, she recognizes herself as a lesbian. “I love you almost as much as I love the Lord” (*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Page-77) – this quote by Jeanette to Melanie, her same-sex relationship partner, proves Jeanette’s ethical belief as she sees homosexual love as sacred as loving the Lord.

This realization of her about her homosexuality starts creating barriers towards religious-centric society and mindset. Religious people and her friends soon identify her as one upon whom malevolent spiritual beings such as demons have possessed. To eradicate the possession of those evil forces from her, those people follow the process of exorcism according to their community belief system. The author highlights how the sexuality of a young girl makes her sinister in the society. While Jeanette was told that she would never be married, she tried to understand the meaning of it and expressed her opinion about homosexuality: “There were two women I knew who didn’t have husbands at all.” Jeanette was too little to understand the words of Mrs. White which were full of sexual and gender stereotypes: “She said they dealt in unnatural passions” (*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Page-45). The author using the symbol of orange depicts the religious-centric society’s mindset and outright non-acceptance about different sexualities associated with LGBTQ. Although Jeanette knows that love is universal, homosexuality is sinful according to Pentecostal religious belief. Thus, exploration of gender and love by a young lesbian has been portrayed throughout the novel, giving rise to importance of gender consciousness.

*The Passion* is Jeanette Winterson’s one of the most highlighted novel which unleashes the facts of perceptions about femininity and masculinity in society. The novel was published in 1987. The first part of the novel gives birth to a character called Henri,

a young French who works as personal chef of Napoleon at Napoleon’s army camp and serves as narrator at the beginning of the novel. He lacks masculine features in his characters. On the contrary, Winterson picturizes another young female character named Villanelle who once was thrown into prostitution and now has to deal with works which are so called associated with males. The novel captures how Villanelle’s perspective about gender role in terms of working and family needs casts the social outdated perception tagged with gender inequality and stereotypes through a feminist view.

The novel has an optimistic passionate view about love and life amid the social disturbance during warfare. Besides, the futility of war, hope and resilience of human beings to live in order to accomplish their passion and desire are included in the novel. “Even the French were beginning to get tired. Even the women without ambition wanted something more than to produce boys to be killed and girls to grow up to produce more boys” (*The Passion*, Page-104) – the quote shows the odds and turmoil during war from which a vivid tough life style in a militaristic society is found. The ugliest scenario of deterioration of humanity is found in war. Through the character depiction of Henri and Villanelle, the unavoidable passion of heart for survival in spite of drowning into the darkest hole of pessimism has been captured. The passion including sexual, familial and spiritual is interwoven within humans and they want chances again and again in spite of having the awareness that they may fail. This is seen in this textual quote: “Gambling is not a vice, it is an expression of our humanness. We gamble. Some do it at the gaming table, some do not. You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play” (*The Passion*, Page-86).

*Gut Symmetries* by Jeanette Winterson ignites the crucial existing subject of gender polarization in a patriarchal society which empowers a man despite shortcomings in him. Published in 1997, the novel tries to capture the Grand Unified Theories (GUTs) of cosmology and quantum physics along with a triangular love and conjugal relationship, depicting a relationship between two physicists, Alice and Jove who were not only fastened with the rules of Physics but also with the social patriarchal rules and ideas. The problem of identity crisis faced by every woman in society has been explored from a different point of view. The acceptance of love between Alice and Jove,

a married man in society illustrates the vices and prejudices of a patriarchal society which promotes gender polarization. The character of Stella, the wife of Jove brings forth the mentality of contemporary society.

In this novel, the triangular relationship complexities between Alice, Jove and his wife Stella clear the fact that men are given the advantages to get access of some things which becomes so called illegal and weird in context of women. The quote from the text like – “Now that physics is proving the intelligence of the universe what are we to do about the stupidity of mankind? I include myself” (*Gut Symmetries*) describes the complexities of human relationship along with rationality of physics in a feminist perspective. The theme of gender polarization has come up through the relationships between the trio and Alice’s concept of female identity. “I cannot assume you will understand me” – unleashes the male attitude standards during that time which enlarges the polarization and gender inequality. Winterson through her novel nicely addresses the subtle psychological facts that help to analyze both the central characters and the man-woman relationship in a society where men hold the greater power having the right of surpassing the barriers of ‘allowance’.

#### Sex and Gender as a Social Phenomenon in novels of Anita Desai

Anita Desai’s major contribution in Indian English novel writing is her famous novel *Cry, The Peacock*. In this novel, Desai brings forth the themes of gender polarization, love and conjugal relationship, idealism, loneliness and natural connectivity, giving rise to female consciousness in the context of postmodern Indian patriarchal backdrop. She searches a female sensitivity for own identity in the heroine of the novel, Maya, a conventional middle-class woman. After her marriage, Maya found differences between herself and her spouse Gautama, an excessive rational man who lacked sensitivity and romanticism. Through the character depiction of Maya, Desai nicely captures the theme of loneliness where Maya is succumbed and out of that she selects the world of fantasy by asserting the relationship of nature and this universe like a believer of pantheism. Maya tries to find her identity through her evaluation about her dead father and her husband who is completely different in nature than Maya. The killing of Gautama by Maya touches the fine psychic

senses with a feminist perspective, enlarging the man-women relationship complexities in a patriarchal scenario.

The novel consists of Maya’s profound sensitivity and female consciousness where the fine psychological status quo of women in post-independent Indian society has been imprinted. “His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and, talking, reveal myself. It is that – my loneliness in this house” (*Cry, The Peacock*, Page-8). Through this horrific narration of solitary life by Maya, the readers understand the fact how a romantic relationship can gradually make a woman neurotic and fanciful who lacks emotional support from her husband since her marriage. Another quote reveals the trauma of Maya she has experienced from her marital relationship at the end of the novel: “In talking, gesturing, he moved in front of me, thus coming between me and the worshipped moon, his figure an ugly, crooked grey shadow that transgressed its sorrowing chastity” (*Cry, The Peacock*, Page-179).

*Clear Light of Day* is one of the most complex novel by Anita Desai. This novel addresses the feminine subjectivity in a male-centric society. Desai, in her novel, breaks the male aesthetic standards of literature, giving rise to feminist sensitivity and voice through the portrayal of the female protagonist, Bim who has faced extensive difficulties to cope with the societal traditional practices that never give value of women’s demand and freedom. Bim and Tara, the author portrays their struggle against their father’s dominated mentality and the conventional practices in society as well. Desai captures how the protagonist is trying to prepare herself against the barriers which she has to face being a woman. Her quest for self-identity challenges the patriarchal domination over women. Textual quote from the novel proves the social mindset that women are born to sacrifice their dreams and life for others: “Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others – to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them” (*Clear Light of Day*, Page-101).

Desai draws a conflict between the demand of women that needs alteration along with modern times and traditional biased perspectives which do not allow women the freedom to meet their dreams and goals.

The fact is evident in Bim's speech: "The wives wanted the new life, they wanted to be modern women. I think they wanted to move into their own separate homes, in New Delhi, and cut their hair short and give card parties, or open boutiques or learn modelling" (*Clear Light of Day*, Page-152). Unveiling the repressed feminine desire and subjectivity through the portrayal of Bim who wants to be economically and socially independent, the novel prioritizes a modernist view towards women's life so that they are able to accomplish their dream, establishing their own identity in male-dominated society.

Anita Desai's famous novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Is a woman-centered novel associated with existential crises of being a woman who faces a series of both physical and psychological challenges during the time of giving birth. Sita, a pregnant housewife who has already three children serves as the protagonist of the novel. Through Sita's decision to return to her village of Manori to deliver her newborn reveals her firm resolution and quest for identity in spite of her husband's denial to move there during her pregnancy. Sita does not like the hectic, mechanical and parochially self-centered environment of city where she lives with her three children and husband. She wants to deliver her child in the natural environment away from the hustle and bustle of city life. This decision of Sita clashes with her husband's dominating mindset of controlling their wives, resulting in psychological disruption in Sita. From the utmost mental agony and emotional turmoil she has to face during her pregnancy, the determination of giving priority to own wish has been cherished in Sita. Here, Desai is successful with her attempt to show the unsupportive nature of masculinity through Sita's so called concerned husband, Raman who never realizes her wife's desire, psyche and emotion as a human being.

Although she misses her husband's presence in Manori during an emotionally stressful situation, Sita does not heed her husband's forceful interdiction and stands firm on her decision to fulfill her wish. It uncovers her individual profoundness and ability to do anything in order to accomplish her wishes. Sita's words portray herself as a rational decision maker and as a conscious mother: "What I am doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again." The eternal suffering she undergoes creates a pessimism within

her and leads her to become cynical on the social structure of marriage and conjugal relationship. Sita, representing the women in post-independent India struggles for survival of her desires among pregnancy pangs.

Both the writers Jeanette Winterson and Anita Desai try to disclose the matter of feminine subjectivity in a high-pitched female voice. Female consciousness is in the center and through the lens of it, both the novelists encompass their writings with the themes of psychological disruption, gender polarization, homosexuality, gender stereotypes, women empowerment, existential and identity crises and man-woman conjugal relationship. Patriarchal society fails to catch the proper understanding of sex and gender. In a nutshell, these novels weave the factors that the characters are trying to realize in order to change the perception that women are not born as women, rather they are constructed as women.

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