

CHAPTER VI

STORIES OF SEARCH AND RESEARCH

The two stories "Surface Textures" and "Scholar and Gypsy" from the collection can be called stories of Search and Research. Because, the main characters in the stories search and research for new meaning in life. For them, 'exploration' and 'search' becomes everything in life. The family occupies secondary place. The conflict in the two stories is between mystery and revelation and it is resolved by their realization which leads them toward spiritualism.

The first story "Surface Textures" deals with a middle class family in the urban milieu. The title of the story is named after the objects with which the main character is preoccupied at every time. Anita Desai focuses on the main character, Harish. Though, the narration begins from Sheila's point of view, it ends with Harish's point of view. Because, Harish is the central character and his wife, Sheila's character is supplementary in relation to the main situation. Thus, there is shift in focus.

The story describes an unusual but an interesting episode about a bureaucrat, Harish who becomes preoccupied with textures of objects. He forgets everything in his search for something new. He is intoxicated by the mere textures of stalks, reed, stem, leaves, stones and goes in search of what his fingers and feet can feel. In his search, he gets absorbed in feeling the textures of the blotting paper. He is dismissed for his negligence of his duties in the government office. Finally, he fails to maintain his family. So, his wife Sheila has to return to her parent's home and Harish who is left alone, wanders into the countryside in his search and ultimately, he becomes a revered swami.



At first glance, the story appears to be very simple. It may seem devoid of any significant action, but when we examine the whole story and consider certain aspects of Harish's character, we learn that his observation of surface textures of objects is not merely a passion, but it is an art and philosophy. It is in his observation he truly finds himself. He does not tell us what he gets from observation and why he does so, but, the author suggests it in the story itself.

It is not merely a character sketch, because, we find a definite progression, a definite movement toward the discovery on the part of Harish, who searches for new meaning. Anita Desai presents the character through action and it includes the smallest gestures, a thought, a word and a decision.

Psychological revelation and analysis is a dominant interest with Anita Desai. She deals with the psychological process. The story depends upon the analysis of states of feeling of the main character. We find subtle psychological changes in Harish's character.

Harish is a civil servant in the government office. He appears as an observant and reflective individual. His wife who has brought a melon for the children, keeps it on the dining table. Harish looks at the melon so curiously as though he has never seen it before. He is mystified by the surface of its textures and regards it with eyes newly opened. He observes its textures by running his fingers up and down with tenderness. He is absorbed in the activity so much that both his body and mind participate harmoniously:

All through the meal his eyes remained fixed on the plate in the centre of the table with its big button of a yellow melon. He left most of his rice and pulses on his plate...

he reached out to touch the melon that so captivated him. With one finger he stroked the coarse grain of its kind... then he ran his fingers up and down the green streaks that divided it into even quarters as by green silk threads, so tenderly.¹

The above passage shows, how tremendously the surface texture of melon affects Harish. When his wife ask him to cut it, he cuts it but with pain. Everybody in the house eats but Harish keeps on observing the slice. When his wife removes the plate, he takes melon seed and delicately holds it between his two fingers and leaves for the office.

The melon becomes "the apple of knowledge" for Harish. Because, wherever he goes, he just observes the surface textures of every object. The important things become worthless for him. His eyes do not rest upon the usual things such as the signboards, the traffic, the number of approaching bus. But he observes the nondescript and unimportant things as the "paving stones", the "length of wire" in a railing at the side of the road and "a pattern of grime" on the windowpane of a disused printing press.

When he goes to the office which issued the ration cards, he forgets the official work and picks up the thick book of a rules and observes the edges of the pages with wonder and tenderness. He looks upon seven hundred pages with "strange devotion". He is dismissed from his post because he neglects his duty and simply spends his time in:

judging the difference between white blotting paper and pink (Pink is flatter, denser, white spongier) and the textures of blotting paper stained with ink and which is fresh that which has been put to melt in a saucer of cold tea and that which has been doused in a pot of ink²

Thus, the textures of even papers become more important than his duty. He does not feel sorry for losing his job. It is his wife who screams, and expresses her helplessness before him. But Harish shuts himself off from the claims of his wife and the needs of his children. He continues his observation by rubbing his thumb over the surface of the small silver box in which she has kept a red kum-kum.

Harish no longer maintains his family. For some days his family gets sympathy of the neighbours. His neighbours dislike him and call him 'inhuman' and "a hungry, hunchbacked hyena hunting along the road".³

Harish has no reaction towards such things. Even, he does not object to, instead he keeps silent. His wife, Sheila with her children, returns to her parent's house. Harish feels sorry, not for her departure but for the silver box that she takes with her. Harish in his search, wanders on the road, sometimes sits under the pipal tree, sometimes on the railway platform. He has no destination. For few days he wanders here and there and lastly he leaves the place and starts hunting. His single obsession is in search of what his fingers can respond to, his feet can feel. In his search, he wanders into the countryside.

*Outside the town the land was rocky and bare and this was Harish's especial paradise, each rock having a surface of such exquisite roughness, of such perfection in shape and design, as to keep him occupied and ecstatic for weeks together. Then the river beyond the rock quarries drew him away and there he discovered the joy of finger-ing silk smooth stalks and reeds, stems and leaves.*⁴

Thus, Harish feels intoxicated by the mere textures of stalks, reeds, stems and leaves. In his search for new meaning, he goes under a change

both mentally and physically. He appears:

*holier, more in human than Harish with his matted hair, his blue, starved skin and single-focused eyes.*⁵

This appearance of Harish brings about a transformation in his status making him holy and safe. The country people think that Harish is swami and worship him. Ultimately, Harish becomes a revered swami. Thus, Harish who "drops out" from job, from family, even from speech, intoxicated by the mere textures of the world 'slides into madness' and joins the group of holymen'. The story ends from Harish's point of view:

*So they worshipped him, fed and watched over him, interpreting his moves in their own fashion, and in turn, watched over their offerings and worshipped.*⁶

The story represents another well-known Indian stereo-type. A single man transformed into a sadhu or swami who renounces the world including his family and friends. This has a parallel in R.K. Narayan's Raju in The Guide. In the Indian situation, an ascetic, real or charlatian is more likely to be successful than a sincere, hard working men. Anita Desai, however keeps a balance while delineating the character of Harish.

The second story is "Scholar and Gypsy". This is the last story of the collection Games at Twilight and Other Stories. It is different from other stories in someways. The story is about a visiting American couple who are as different from each other as they are from India. The title is named after the main characters, David and Pat. David is the scholar and he is working on a thesis. Pat is the gypsy.

The story is about the clash of cultures and about redefinitions of meanings. Anita Desai depicts the foreign characters in the Indian settig and atmosphere of scorching heat. It is a long story and it can be divided into three parts. The first part — American couple's visit to Bombay, the

second part -- they move to Delhi and the third part -- their visit to Manali, which really brings about a complete change in the main characters.

David and Pat are the main characters but Anita Desai focuses on Pat's character. It is she who searches for new meaning. Life becomes a search and exploration for her. It presents American couple's reaction to their experiences in India. In the vivid background of Indian setting and atmosphere, she presents the characters of David and Pat. She depicts the characters with the help of dialogue and action.

Pat considers the urban social life in Bombay as primitive and wild. When they come to Delhi, Pat's mood does not change. Lastly, their visit to Manali brings about in her a complete change. For her, it becomes an escape from India and its horrible cities. Pat's escape leads her to the hippies and bhang and finally she joins them in her search for nirvana. While David returns to Delhi and his thesis. The main characters David and Pat, shed their old selves, and move towards some kind of self realization.

The story begins with the hot atmosphere in Bombay. In their first visit to Bombay, Pat finds it difficult in adjusting to the heat, smells, congestion, noise, filth and poverty of Bombay. Pat says:

*I feel half-dead, David, sometimes quite dead.*⁷

This shows Pat's reaction to the scorching heat in Bombay. Anita Desai presents Pat's character with certain attitudes of prudishness and narrowmindedness. When they begin to attend parties, Pat feels that going to parties is the chief occupation of people in Bombay. She considers the social life of Bombay as 'primitive' and 'wild' and is shocked by the Indian dress and the display of the female body. At a party in Bombay, Pat

experiences repulsion toward an Indian woman wearing a "vermillion sari tied below the navel". She finds the same thing in Gidwani's wife at a dinner. These experiences make her cry and say "get me out, get me out".⁸ David, who finds it difficult to convince her, takes her to Delhi thinking that it is better for them.

The second part deals with the setting and hot atmosphere of Delhi. The return from Bombay to Delhi does not change Pat's mood. She goes round the antique shops of New Delhi and she feels interested in Indian art and culture. But, she is shocked by the primitiveness and elemental barbarism in the Hindu statues described as follows:

*those great heavy bosoms of bronze and stone, the
the hips rounded and full of water-ports, the flirtatious
little bells on ankles and bellies, the long, sly eyes that
curved out of the voluptuous stone faces....*⁹

This reveals Pat's narrow-mindedness about Hindu statues. Pat seems unnatural because, being a sophisticated westerner, she has such a bitter contempt towards the Indian art and culture. It seems ironic also. Because, it is she who lacks sophistication. She says:

*I am just not sophisticated enough for you... you know I
only went to highschool and stayed home after that.*¹⁰

This shows that she is angry with herself. All the times she longs to be free and amidst nature. She becomes nostalgic for the lost home for apple trees and cows, for red barns and wallows, for ice-cream sodas and drive in — movies which are fading from her. David and Pat think it is better to go to the hills. Pat, who is distressed by the heat and crowds of the cities is taken to the hill country Manali in the kulu valley.

The third part deals with the beautiful setting and atmosphere in Manali. The polarity between city and village/garden is dominant in the story. Anita Desai gives the minute and beautiful setting of Manali described as follows:

*Manali — barely a town, merely an overgrown village, a place for shepherds to halt on their way up to the pass and over it to Lahaul, and apple growers to load their fruit on to lorries bound for the plains, suddenly struck and swollen by a seasonal avalanche of tourists and their vehicles... it was innocent and open and if it did not clamorously and cravenly invite, it did not shut its doors either it had none to shut. It lay in the cup of the valley, river and forest to one side, bright paddy fields and apple orchards to the other, open and sunlit, small and easy.*¹¹

This description of setting and atmosphere plays a vital role in the story. Because, it brings a tremendous change in Pat. As they move from the city to the hills, her interest is revived, but it is not shared by David. He begins to feel estranged from her. Pat defends her attraction, to Manali condemning the rest of India. The scenery of the forest is superb. Pat feels relieved in the midst of nature. David calls Pat's strong desire after country side, a desire for 'a forest and an orchard and a village'. For Pat it becomes a 'magical spot on earth'. Like Harish in the "Surface Textures", Pat finds it as a land of 'Paradise', where she can search for new meaning. It becomes a place of relief. She says:

*I'd gotten to think of India as one horrible temple, bursting, crawling with people — people on their knees, hopeless people — and those horrible idols towering over them with their hundred legs and hundred heads—all horrible...*¹²

Thus, Pat is relieved to escape from 'the greasy Indian masses', 'whining and cajoling and sneering'. She finds the honesty, independence in the mountain people. So, the mountain people to her are like "gods amongst those crawling, cringing masses" with "furtive Indian faces".

Her meeting hippies and bhang, brings a complete change in her attitude to her husband, David. He observes Pat who is changed both physically and mentally:

As she grew browner from the outdoor life and her limbs sturdier from the excercise, it seemed to him she was losing the fragility, the gentleness that he had loved in her, that she was growing into some tough, sharp country woman who might very well carry loads, chop wood, haul water and harvest, but was scarcely fit to be his wife- his, David's, the charming and socially graceful young David of Long Island up bring^{ing} and her movements were marked by rough angles that jarred on him, her voice, when she bothered at all to reply to his vague questions, was brusque and abrupt .¹³

The above passage shows that Pat -- the sophisticated westerner is changed into a rough country woman. It is clear from the above quotation that there is no meeting-point between them anymore. Like Harish, for Pat too, the family occupies secondary place. She forget everything: her husband, her country and her return. She has no interest in meeting David.

Pat's escape leads her to hippies and bhang and she is only in search of nirvana. She remains barefoot, chanting, uplifted, haunter of wooden shrines, with her orthodox westerners in search of nirvana. And it is David who returns to Delhi and his thesis.

Anita Desai throws light on the characters of David and Pat, who forget to play their parts as sophisticated foreigners. They shed their external poses and move towards some kind of self-revelation and assessment.

Anita Desai wields the weapon of irony in an extremely delicate manner. Pat who comes from the most civilized country -- is disgusted with its hybridized version in Bombay and Delhi. But her search takes her to the hills where she identifies with hippies. The story reveals a deep malaise in the western civilization; a great spiritual vacuum which is filled by the smoking of bhang. It is a search for Nirvana, here and now.

The title reminds us of Matthew Arnold's poem The Scholar-Gypsy.

Pat is shown to be an individual who is suffering from the so called "disease of modern life" which is deprived of any contact with nature and freedom. Where as, the real scholar -- David is engaged in 'research' and is happy with his work in the busy city.