

Personality Traits of Annie Zaidi's Female Characters in *Love Story #1 to 14*

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Abstract. Annie Zaidi is a keen observer of her own society, and her writing is guided by a strong sense of social justice. She has written about problems associated with India's democratic process, its bureaucracy and infrastructure, and its cultural and caste prejudices. She is particularly interested in the unique hurdles faced by women. She caught attention when she won the Nine Dots Award in May 2019 for addressing the contemporary issue of the world. She herself admits :

What really appealed to me about the Nine Dots Prize was the way it encouraged entrants to think without borders or restraints. ... The Prize will allow me to dedicate time to the examination of this question, which is of critical importance in the modern world. (The Nine Dots Prize, 2019)

Annie Zaidi's set of stories in *Love Story # 1 to 14* is a set of interior monologues or we would call them dramatic monologues from the Robert Browning viewpoint; a person looking at life and sometimes stumbling on an attraction without being aware of it in different ways. A lonely woman, for example, falls in love with the voice of an announcer at a railway station and undertakes a train journey just to hear the voice. That is actually the opening story and is used to signal to the reader that Zaidi's romances do not start with a 'once upon a time' in the accepted fashion. In this work of Annie Zaidi, people are more in love with love than with the lover. In the 14 stories, Zaidi explores every aspect of this 'not so brief' madness through situations that could belong to any part of the country. All the stories are characterized by a deep sense of compassion, though their titles – hashtags, aka and all – offset the compassion with a modern quirkiness. The collection gives credit to a writer who wants to be taken seriously. Annie Zaidi takes us on a voyage through the nature of love in modern, urban India. Occasionally one wonders how the protagonists are so omniscient that they can understand the thoughts going through people's psyche and not necessarily the 'two hearts beating as one kind of understanding'. Annie Zaidi's *Love stories # 1 to 14* are at once warm and distant, violent and gentle - and, above all, untroubled by cynicism. This is a look at love, straight in the eye, to understand the alluring nature of the beast.

Keywords : Infrastructure; bureaucracy; cultural and caste prejudice; interior monologue; dramatic monologue; personality; cynicism.

The paper tries to discover the extent of the psychological aspect and the sense of interiority of characters in Annie Zaidi's *Love Story# 1 to 14* (2012). Annie Zaidi is a very keen observer of her society and her writings are dominated by a strong sense of social issues and justice. She is very much aware of Indian society and various problems which are associated with India's democratic process, such as its bureaucracy and infrastructure, and its cultural and Interfaith issues. She is very much interested in the various problems faced by women at every step of their life and career. In her essay 'Embodying Venus,' she raised various questions about the meaning of women's empowerment and their being unashamed of their bodies.

Annie Zaidi caught attention when she won the Nine Dots Award in May 2019, a prestigious book prize created to award innovative thinking for addressing the contemporary issue of the world. The winner of the Nine Dots Prize is encouraged to develop their response into a full-length book which is to be published by Cambridge University Press. With this award, she earned US \$ 100,000 financial award for her entry 'Bread, Cement, Cactus', combined memoirs and reportage to explore concepts of home and belonging rooted in her experiences of contemporary life in India. She herself admits:

My work has often crossed over genres, traversing between memoir and journalism, and this timely but wide-open question encouraged us to approach it with methods that were equally far-ranging. I had been working towards a similarly themed project for a while but didn't have the financial, or even mental, bandwidth to do it justice. ... I'm extremely grateful for this opportunity and am looking forward to the challenges and excitement of the year ahead. (The Nine Dots Prize, 2019)

Annie Zaidi is one of those rare contemporary writers who has tried her hand at different formats and various styles. When someone has experimented with so many forms of writing, does it require compartmentalising the brain to focus differently on each? This is the question asked to her in an interview. She said :

There are no mental compartments. Now that I write for a living, I have to only decide the form based on who I'm writing for and how much space I can take up. At a creative level, I just have to decide what the thing I'm thinking wants to be. Sometimes, a line comes to me and I know instinctively it belongs to a poem. Sometimes an image crops up and I have to choose between drama, film, and short fiction. Sometimes I begin writing a script and then decide to turn it into short fiction instead. (Scroll In May 28, 2017)

She has written essays, poetry, fiction of different lengths, memoirs and also written several play scripts that have been performed on the stage, and a handful of short films that can be watched on YouTube. She has authored *Known Turf: Bantering with Bandits and Other True Tales in 2010*, a collection of essays shortlisted for the prestigious Vodafone Crossword Book Award (2011). She is the co-author of *The Bad Boys' Guide to the Good Indian Girl* (2014), a series of poems, *Crush* (2007) which was jointly published with Gynell Alves. A collection of shorts story, *Love Stories # 1 to 14* (2012) and *Sleep Tight* were published in 2012 and 2013 respectively. She published two more novels which are *Gulab* in 2014 and *A Prelude to a Riot* in 2019 and a memoir *Bread, Cement, Cactus* in 2020. She also writes drama and plays. *So Many Socks* was shortlisted for the prestigious META awards for 2012. Her first full-length script *Name, Place, Animal, Thing* was shortlisted for The Hindu Metroplus Playwright Award, 2009. A radio play *Jam* was the regional (South Asia) winner for BBC's International Playwriting Competition 2011. *Jaal* (Hindi play) opened at Prithvi Theatre as part of writers Bloc:3, a drama festival in Mumbai in 2012. Her work has appeared in various anthologies, including *Mumbai Noir*, *Women Changing India*, *India Shining*, *India Changing*, and literary journals like *The little Magazine*, *Pratilipi*, *Out of Print*, and *The Missing Slate*.

There is a sort of personality traits and the sense of interiority of female characters in Annie Zaidi's *Love Story# 1 to 14*. These stories are a set of interior monologues – dramatic monologues we would call them, if we were considering them from a Robert Browning viewpoint; a person looking at life and sometimes stumbling on an attraction without being aware of it in different ways. A lonely woman, for example, falling in love with the voice of an announcer in a railway station and making train journey just to hear the voice. That is actually the opening story and is used to signal to the reader that Zaidi's romances do not start with a 'once upon a time' in the accepted fashion. In an interview for *The Bombay Review*, she herself said, "I don't think there is any such thing as an 'ever after' – happy or not. We are mortal. In story #1, for instance, a happy love story is thrown into disrepair because of our mortality. People go through happy or hopeful phases viz love. But it is true that I am drawn to write about complicated phases. If people are happy, then what is there to say, except – A and B were happy together and they stayed happy together for x number of years. It's like that little ditty we used to hear as kids, "Ektha raja, ekthi rani; dono mar gaye, khatam kahani". (Internet)

These 14 stories are about people in various stages of longing – whether framed by an actual, present relationship, or a remembered or illusory one, or one that never quite tips over into a conventional romance – and they deliver different type of views of love and its effects. Thus, "The One that Badly Wanted" has a girl being fixed on a boy she never summons the courage to talk to, and later attempting to remake a boyfriend in the image of a dead man; the story's final sentence is a reminder that what sometimes gets called love can be a selfish, or at least a self-replenishing, emotion. A subtler feeling stirs in "The One from Radheshyam (B)

Cooperative Housing Society” when a middle-aged painter is moved by the solicitousness of an old man who she initially feared was stalking her (later, falling into a hesitant, self-conscious friendship, “they spoke staccato, like engines in very old cars”). The compact, skilfully constructed in “The One that Climbed out of a Bucket” – has a woman experiencing a rush of memories at a most unexpected time. As she watches a gecko trapped in a bucket during her bath, one thought segues into another: she goes from reflecting on the absurdity of a typical Hindi-film scene to thinking about cleaning the spots where the lizard has been, to recalling her own illicit presence in an ex-boyfriend’s life and house.

Elsewhere, there is the underlying knowledge that love as an ideal can be more powerful and seductive than the real thing. A man whose wife was once a narcotics addict and he never really knew her as he did not know about this. A woman wonders what might happen if her husband showed up one night and “his smile was not real”, a married couple finds that their eyes “no longer dance around each other”, a conversation between former lovers seems, at first, calm and measured, but tension builds as they are not carrying the same weight of emotional baggage and one of them is more damaged than the other.

The one that is unusual was the last story, “The One that Stepped off a Broken-down Bus”, which can be viewed as a sort of summarising refrain for the book. Here, two sensitive people meet on a bus, tease each other and discuss the complexities of love and what being connected to another life really means, what it means at different ages, practicality versus spontaneity, and so on. The story is readable enough on its own terms, but its weight of expository talk went against the subtler mood established by the earlier stories. That mood depends upon things being revealed through delicate observation of human behaviour in specific situations.

Her narratives are in the subjective third person, with perspectives sometimes shifting within a story and none of the characters is named. The use of “she” and “he” might have become precious, but it works because of the universality of the feelings involved. And her narrators are sensitive people, not all women, some of them are artists and many of them are estranged from the world around them, especially from that one particular person who may or may not be a lover. Zaidi’s skill of observation is used to affect when one of her narrators looks at a baby gecko trying to swim in a bucket and thinks of the man she might or might not love – love after all is a complicated word. It implies being attached to someone with no room for external distractions.

Very often people are more in love with love than with the lover. In the 14 stories, Zaidi explores every aspect of this ‘not so brief’ madness through situations that could belong to any part of the country. All the stories are characterized by a deep sense of compassion, though their titles – hashtags, aka and all – offset the compassion with a modern quirkiness.

Most of the actions are internal, because on the surface very little moves. There are walks in the park, stolen mufflers, geckos on the walls and in the bucket, or a hunt for medical reports. The stories are very much about mind over matter. Nor is sex a part of it, the emphasis being on the undercurrent of chemistry that if strong enough can be visible to an entire roomful of people. Apart from the psychological acuity of such passages and their sense of a character's interiority, these stories also tell us how, given time and a worsening state of affairs, a well-meaning person might cross a line. These stories suggest many possible futures awaiting and it carries a sense that the relationship constantly needs to be worked on, and that more ruptures may lie ahead. The marvel of this book is its clear-sightedness which could so easily have become bleak or cynical and it goes hand in hand with genuine tenderness and empathy.

The collection does credit a writer who wants to be taken seriously. Annie Zaidi takes us on a voyage through the nature of love in modern, urban India. Occasionally one wonders how the protagonists are so omniscient that they can understand the thoughts going through people's heads in the flash of an eye – and not necessarily the 'two hearts beating as one' kind of understanding. In one story, a man realizes his wife has returned because she is worried about her finances if she divorces him, in another one, a woman understands a retired army officer's marital history perfectly without ever having been married or deeply involved herself. One could perhaps say that love was responsible for this percipient wisdom, but lovers are seldom that wise, as some of the stories themselves can testify.

The tone of the book is consistently hushed, reflective, and shorn of hysteria, even in a description of two people arguing, with a lifetime of companionship on the line, but beneath its still surfaces lies much emotional turbulence. Annie Zaidi's *Love Stories # 1 to 14* are at once warm and distant, violent and gentle and above all, untroubled by cynicism. This is a look at love, straight in the eye, to understand the alluring nature of the beast.

To conclude, we may say that the story is brilliant not only because it is about personality traits and character interiority but also because of its great lucidity triggered by Annie Zaidi's use of simple language, sometimes shifting within a story, internal action, the recurrent use of "she" and "he" in place of the name which works because of its universality of feelings involved and characterization of a deep sense of compassion, though their titles – hashtags, aka and all. These narratives are in the subjective third person which develops a great bond between the author and the reader. Annie Zaidi's sincere effort to make these stories realistic also makes the text highly lucid and readable. Her interests in social and psychological issues also make this work (*Love Story # 1 to 14*) great and worth reading.

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