

SELF REALIZATION OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN ANITA DESAI'S FICTION

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Anita Desai is a renowned name in Indian fiction. Her novels show a woman's quest of identity because of her alienation, aloofness, loneliness identical crisis of women's personality. As a writer, her effort is to see her women characters as humans with their own compulsions. Her novels have been examined as the manifesto of female predicament and creative release of the feminine sensibility. Her feminism is not anti-male and her women need man's loving company and aspire for the bliss and thrill of life which are ever denied to them. She tries to voice the voiceless miseries and helplessness of millions of married women, tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments. She focuses on how her heroines, in the contemporary urban milieu are bravely struggling against or helplessly submitting to the relentless forces of absurd life. Desai has natural preference for writing about women characters. The most recurrent themes in all her novels are "the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism" (Rao, A.V Krishna 50) of her characters. Although she is preoccupied with the theme of incompatible marital couples yet we come across different kinds of female characters in her novels. Her heroines are not mere goddesses or robots but they are individuals. She has presented both the extremes. If at one extreme there are sensitive women characters, on the other, we also find thick skinned women with blunt sensibility. Desai's first four novels are a study of women's depression resulting from their inability to grapple with their family situation and their quest for their identity. In her very first novel *Cry, the Peacock* we find examples of two extremes. Maya, the heroine is a neurotic young woman whose sanity is fast disintegrating under the pressure of marital discord and of certain vague but

frightening childhood memories. Maya, a spoiled and pampered daughter of a wealthy Brahman family is married to Gautama, a rather insensitive advocate who fails to understand her sensitive nature. She suffers from father obsession and looks for the typical father image in her husband. Here Desai has dealt with a sterile woman, highly sensitive and emotional lady, Maya. Though Gautama loves her in his own way, yet, Maya is never satisfied and happy. She feels that Gautama never cares for her and does not have any feelings for her. *Voices in the City* articulated Monisha's plight and psychic life and intimately shows the woman as female birds in the cages. She loves to see herself as an unfettered individual and not to become at any stage a complacent, tame wife who adjusts her self to a glided cage.

Anita Desai is unquestionably one of the most powerful contemporary women Indian novelists in English. Desai, born in 1937, of a German mother and Bengali father, is a north Indian novelist known for her sensibility of inner world. She represents the welcome "creative release of the feminine sensibility" (Rao, A.V Krishna 50) which began to emerge after the Second World War. In the following year she married Ashvin Desai, they had four children. She had started to write short stories regularly before her marriage rather than the queer world of action. As a novelist Desai made her debut in 1963 with her very famous novel *Cry, the Peacock*. She is a writer who elaborates a woman's feelings, emotions, alienation, loneliness, aloofness, and quest for self identity very clearly and beautifully. In addition to a large number of essays, articles, reviews, short stories, Anita Desai has written about a dozen popular novels to her credit. Besides being a professor at various educational centers in different parts of the world, she is the recipient of Sahitya

Akademi Award (1978), Guardian Award (1984), Booker McConnel Prize (1980), Padmashri (1990) and Neil Gunn Award (1994) etc.

The most recurrent themes in all her novels are “the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism” (Narasimhan, Raji .23). Sarah in the Bye-Bye Blackbird is alienated from her parents. Desai treats Sarah with the sensitivity of a woman. Always aware of those forces that change her destiny as a female. Even with all her acceptance Sarah remains an outsider in her own chosen world. Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? is an irrational, childish and petulant character. Through the character of Sita and Maya, Desai has portrayed the feminine psyche of neurotic women. They might be called sub-normal if not abnormal. Anita Desai’s psychological probing of the women is that she includes females of different age groups. It is not that she confines herself to the young or the middle aged. Nanda Kaul, the protagonist, in Desai’s fifth novel Fire on the Mountain is unique amongst the protagonist of Desai’s other novels. She is also very old, having great-grand children. She wants to spend the remaining period of her life in complete solitude and in complete privacy. For this, she has chosen a palatial old house called Carignano in the hill town of Kasauli. This situation of living all alone, completely divorced from the humdrum life of the city and the plains, without links with relatives and friends, is a situation largely of her own free choice. For this purpose R.S. Sharma rightly says that, “the words are expressive of Raka’s resolve to destroy a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural” (127).

Clear light of Day is also a family drama covering two generations of Das family but mainly dealing with the second generation, that is of the children – Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba. The novel covers two historical periods of India, one of freedom struggle and another of independence. The story is primarily narrated from Bim’s point of view who is the most important character in the novel. She sacrifices her whole life for her retarded Baba

and senile Mira Masi since she was the eldest of the family and her father had died. The novel is also of an old woman. The novel has two epigraphs, one referring to memory and another to the passage of time. The Village by the Sea is yet another novel of Anita Desai, here a frustrated brother rebels against the family and in consequence, a tender child Zila is forced into accepting the family responsibilities because of her mother’s sickness and father’s drunkenness. In this novel existentialism occurs rather thinly. Here, through the life of a young village boy Hari, Desai captures the existential predicament of the rural ties undergoing the pangs of a society in transition. The main tussle in this novel is between involvement and detachment. The protagonist is caught between his mental tension and outer realities.

In Custody (1984), Anita Desai enters a new phase in her creative career. The highly strung or intensely introspective woman protagonist of the earlier novels here gives way to a male protagonist Deven who is a somewhat shy and awkward hero. He comes through the trials of life with a positive vision and self-sufficiency through awareness honest recognition of human limitations. The novel unfolds the predicament in the life of credulous and deceitful Deven Sharma who is swayed by an idea of creating a work of his life, but fails to measure himself upto the demands of the situation when an occasion to fulfil his ambition actually arrives. Anita Desai’s first collection of short stories Games at Twilight and other stories was published in 1978. Her short-stories which are witty, evocative, tender and perceptive reveal her skill and dexterity in handling this genre. In her short stories she has taken up themes like the tension between convention and exploration, family solidarity and individualism, social requirements and the impersonal factors like death and art. Games at Twilight (1978) is an in depth study of psychology of children at play. We find a kind of withdrawal, withdrawal from material pursuits through a Muslim woman and a very old man that Suno, the protagonist in the story studies in the Park. In Surfae Textures, the Protagonist’s wife reveals a typical Indian wife’s characteristic. In Sale

we find poor artist's wife kneading dough in a brass bowl. *A devoted son* presents Rakesh, who after getting success in the examination touches his father's feet according to Indian customs; *Pigeons at Day break* depicts the devotion of a true Indian wife to her valetudinarian husband. In the story *The Accompanist*, Desai delineates the emotional state of Tanpura Player.

Her latest novel Baumgartner's Bombay has the theme of the plight of a displaced person who is the hero of the novel. Hugo Baumgartner is a Jew who is advised to leave Germany at the rise of Nazism and he comes to the British India the Second World War to begin his new life. The title of the novel refers to the hero's experience of Bombay because after independence he lived in Bombay. The novel covers a long period of time beginning from Baumgartner's childhood in Berlin and coming down to his murder in Circa, the late 60s or early 70s. The novel focuses on Baumgartner but there are other characters also all of whom are connected with him. It is the story of rootless, homeless and familyless man always trying to belong, wanting to be accepted but never accepted. The pathos of the novel lies in the fact that even after living for almost fifty years in India he is not accepted by Indian society and engages himself in picking up stray and wounded cats and keeps them in his flat but the unfeeling world calls him *Billiwala Pagal*. The novel uses flashback technique through which we are informed of his childhood. From the technique point of view, another noticeable thing is the novelist's realistic descriptions of places, for example, that of Benaras. We do not know if the novelist had visited Benaras but her description is faithful. Desai's innovations go make her "a disturbing and demanding presence in Indo-Anglian Fiction" (Maini 216).

Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) has been often depicted as a spiritual quest, a voyage of spiritual awakening and recovery of faith i.e. a journey from alienation to affirmation. The complex plot of this novel provides an open and wide field for the interplay of Matteo's nagging sense of alienation and his restless quest for spirituality. In fact, with this novel Anita Desai breaks away from the

treatment of the theme of East-West encounter in a cliché-ridden traditional manner. It does not conform to the conventional deburden or a mission of civilizing the wild and uncouth society. At one level, the novel becomes a spiritual Odyssey of the female protagonist Laila, who is White European and whose spiritual quest takes her through a range of Islamic, Christian and Hindu cultures; and in the process of her ruthless exposure to multiple ethnic sensibilities. In her serious attempts to discover the flecked reality of the spiritual and the mundane world, she ends up discovering herself.

The novel *Fasting Feasting* (1999) depicts the story of expatriate Indians. There are two protagonists in this novel and it is structured through a brother and sister, one an introvert and other extrovert. The brother goes to America and thereon the novel is about two families, one Indian and other American. Anita Desai has thus presented in her novels the predicament of sensitive women characters, who find it very difficult to adjust in the present mechanical and urbanized setup. The novelist's language and theme also reveal the meaningful correlations between the psychic conditions of the characters. Mrs. Desai is primarily concerned with the fate of the married woman in Indian society today. Her women become victims of the traditional modes of existence without a strong terra firma, which makes them intensely conscious of their lack of identity. Their protest mostly turns into frustration, for as an Indian girl a woman is brought up to be passive, meek and obedient. With this kind of orthodox background she tries to depict the oppressive and unfeeling marital bond. Hence Mrs. Desai presents the unhappy situations of women in Indian society. She has handled the issues of violence against women artistically and veraciously. Desai's second volume of Short stories *Diamond Dust* (2000) is not as successful as her first collection, *Games at Twilight and other Stories* (1978). The first story *Royalty* deals with Raja, Sarla and Ravi. The second story *winterscape* is a touching story about the deep love between two Sisters.

Then Desai has shifted to foreign land as the background of her latest novel *The Zigzag Way*

(2004). Desai again centres her attention on a male character Eric whose psyche is displayed. Unlike Fasting, Feasting where major characters were women like Uma, Aruna, Anamika or Melony; this novel presents Em, the girlfriend of Eric as a support to run the narrative. Desai continues the thematic experimentation with foreign characters in this novel too with the subject matter of foreign and their displacement. Eric, a New England born student in history at Harvard, is a newly minted historian just out of graduate school, unsure of his past choices and future options. With no clear direction, he follows his lover, Em, when she travels to the Yucatan for her scientific research, But unfortunately once she sets off with her colleagues to conduct field operations, Eric ends up alone and overwhelmed in this foreign place. Then he pursues his own private quest, tracing his family's history to a Mexican ghost town, where, a hundred years earlier, young Cornish Miners toiled to the death. With vivid sympathy, Desai conjures the struggles of Eric's grandparents and their community.

In this way we can conclude that Desai portrays the basic human problems and the anguish of the lonely soul. In spite of all apparent relationships, woman is alone. No human relationship can relieve her of her existential problems. The loss of moral and spiritual moorings leads the characters to an intense awareness of futility. Though they are defeated in the battle of life, they do not surrender their individuality. On the other hand, they accept stoically the challenges of life. Anita Desai's vision of life is one of ambivalence, born out of an awareness of paradoxes at various levels. Her fictional world is a world of defeat and

disillusionment on the one hand and on the other of compromises and reconciliations. Memory and dream, joy and suffering, disillusionment and hallucination, individual and community are the central preoccupations around which revolve Desai's perception of the paradoxes. In the process of realizing these paradoxes Desai's characters undergo a process of suffering and purgation. The assertion of the existential reality of the individual against the forces of chaos and disintegration creates a profound sense of tragic tension. The experience of defeat and disillusionment in Anita Desai's fiction not only leads to agony and suffering but also to an acquiescence of life. Her protagonists confront with courage the sordid realities of life that threaten to submerge the individual self in the welter of cosmopolitanism and social obligations. Though they often fail in their mission, their confrontation assumes a tragic dimension in terms of their anguish and profound introspection. They are tormented souls who, in their death-in-life, aspire towards life-in-death. Desai's fictional world also reflects a tragic sense of life.

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