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An Exposure of Women Psyche: A Selective Study in Anita Desai's Novels

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Abstract:

Anita Desai with her marvellous creative intelligence has rendered a new dimension to the Indian writing in English in modern India. A close analysis of her works reveals not only the characteristic feature of giving importance to the psychological condition of her sensitive women characters but also the skilful handling of language and imagery that gives the vivid and realistic portraits in expressing the interior psyche. Her characters like Nanda Kaul and Maya are quite disgruntled and dissatisfied in their marital relationships. Her characters are psychological rebels who find it difficult to compromise with the milieu.

Keywords: women predicament, alienation, solitude, feminine sensibility, patriarchy

Anita Desai's creative output is a masterpiece in exploring individual emotions and passions. They not only discover the subtleties of human ties at the individual strand but of relationships at the present socio psychic backdrop. She is altogether a novelist, short story writer, screen writer and children's writer. Generations of writers have been influenced by her writings. She is originally an Indian citizen but migrated to America. She can also be considered an expatriate writer of the Indian origin.

Her father was a Bengali business executive and mother was a German expatriate, a teacher. Such mixed parentage gives her the platform to write about India, Indians as well as about migrants in India and Indian migrants to the west. She had an urge to write stories since her childhood from the age of seven. She takes writing to be an intellectual exercise. Anita Desai claims, "Language is the universal whore whom I have made a virgin." in her interview with Jasbir Jain, Anita Desai mentions:

I didn't pick English out, I don't think a child of seven is capable of doing so. I must have simply picked the language which came most fluently and easily to me. Why it came so fluently to me, I should think because I did most of my reading in it. I still find, although I do read German, and Bengali and

Hindi, I do it with more effect, whereas English
requires no effort whatsoever.(p.8)

Though she was quite comfortable in both German and Bengali languages inherited from her parents, but preferred to write in English language as a spontaneous flow.

I think and all Indians are aware since all of us
are bilingual of not trilingual one tends to employ
more than one language and select whichever
word seems more apt and most descriptive at the
moment. There are a few German words and
phrases which come easily to me, seem to me to be
more descriptive than their Hindi or their English
or Bengali counterparts, but, actually I have had to
quite consciously erase this from my writing as
from my present life too. It would be too
complicating to bring in the German strand apart
from all other strands which make up my life.(p.8)

Her writings are filled with the creative intelligence of emotions, moods, impressions and the depth. In reaction with the modern taste for noisy, show off fiction she remarks,

I think writers have a duty to reflect the times,
which are noisy, faster, wilder- but it's not my
experience and I can't pretend it is; for some reason
it always shows in the writing.

She has been honoured with a number of accolades. She has been a fellow of the Royal Society of literature in London. She has been an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has been awarded numerous prizes and honours, including the Winifred Holtby Prize of the Royal Society of Literature in 1978; the Padma Sri Award from the Government of India, Alberto Moravia award for Literature in 2000, the Neil Gunn prize for International Literature in 1993 from the Scottish Arts Council etc.

In the canon of contemporary Indian women writers Anita Desai occupies a distinguished place, creating a new literary tradition of Indian writing in English. Her

writings deal with issues such as hybridity, shifting identities and "imaginary homelands" a phrase coined by Salman Rushdie.

Since 1972, Anita Desai has been a member of the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi. Anita Desai now lives in New York's Putnam Country. Her extensive teaching career includes positions as the Elizabeth Drew Visiting Professor at Smith College 1987-88; the Gilder Sleeves Professor at Barnard College; the Purington Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College 198-93; and a visiting scholar at the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, Italy. But of all the places where she has worked with budding writers, she concedes there is something uniquely intriguing about MIT.

Her writings give a brilliant portrayal of the inner life and feelings of her female characters dealing with the psychological aspects of the women predicaments. She states,

I don't have an agenda as a writer. People think that because I write about India I must be trying to portray India in a way. But, really, when you write you don't think about your readers at all; you don't imagine what your readers will look for or what they expect from a book. You are alone with that page and with your pen. You are really only playing a game by yourself: of imagining thoughts and images with the best words suitable. It's an exploration of language: how much can language do, how far can it pretend human experience and feelings.(p.3)

She shows a depth of study for Indian life. Her characters which are often amusing and poignant seem to struggle experiencing hard time to achieve their dreams in a world which is tough, unsympathetic complicated with a tone of empathy and gentleness. Her writings project women's struggle in asserting their independence in a conservative Indian society. Her novels not only portray the social and cultural changes in the Indian society but also the role of family and relationships that play an important part and its might. She tries her best to reflect the aspirations, struggles of society. Her stories, novels and children's books give a clear picture of personal struggles and problems of contemporary life involving the predicament of female characters who undergo the complexities of the modern Indian culture. Anita Desai quotes:

My novels don't have themes – at least not till

they are finished, published or read, do I see any theme. While writing I follow my instinct, I follow flashes of insight, I veer away from or even fight anything that threatens to distort or destroy this insight, and somehow come to the end and look back to see the pattern of footprints on the sand.(p.4)

She has a number of novels to her credit such as *Cry, the Peacock*(1963), *Voices in the City*(1965), *Bye-Bye Blackbird*(1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain*(1977), *Clear Light of Day*(1980) etc. Anita Desai began to publish stories in the late 1950s and became one of India's leading post- independence novelists. Alan Lightman said:

Her novels are distinguished by her focus on the inner life of her characters and her concern with people previously marginalized in Indian fiction, primarily women, children and the elderly. (no.8)

Her uniqueness lies in the depth and passion of her writing. Being a devoted wife and mother of four children she managed to devote time for her writings. While she is up to a novel the central idea keeps her haunting even if she is busy otherwise. Meena Shirwadkar states:

The changes in Indian society, novels have started to progress from depicting women characters solely as epitomes of suffering, womanly virtue to portraying more complex, real characters. Tradition, transition and modernity are the stages through which the woman in Indo-Anglian novel is passing. The image of traditional woman, the Sita Savitri type, was at once, easy and popular...In India, with its strong bent for tradition, woman was expected mainly to live for others than for herself because "others" controlled and moulded

the social structure. Even woman in life and literature herself voluntarily surrendered to the ideal of self sacrifice...Modern woman, in life, has been trying to throw off the burden of inhibitions she has carried for ages. Yet, a woman on way (sic) to liberation, trying to be free from inhibitions, is rarely seen in Indo- Anglian literature.(153-154)

In her writings she gives upmost importance to form, rhythm, perspective and vision. But all these does not come altogether as a planned idea to her in the beginning. And also she has no fixed rule to follow. She keeps intuition as the core of her writings:

One can only feel one's way by intuition.

Intuition is silent. Also one must have the critical sense to know when something threatens to cloud this vision. One must avoid such things, discard them.

Her writings depict Indian life and her characters are from middle-class English-speaking India. Her novels and short stories circle around the theme of intercultural assimilation and feeling of alienation. Professor, Alan Lightman said:

She is a novelist of the human psyche, and she approaches her subjects quietly and delicately. She is one of the world's most distinguished novelists in English.(p.5)

Dealing with the human psyche, Anita Desai's fictional world encompasses Indian, American and European cultures. Her writings projects the Indian families with their conflicts and struggles at the backdrop of some social change or historical event. She once wrote: "I see India through my mother's eyes, as an outsider but my feelings for India are my father's, of someone born here." Some of her novels give the glimpse of Chekovian sensibility tensions within the family, difficulty in expressing these feelings, disillusionment, the sense of alienation by women from middle class who are dwindling between the needs of self and the social demands in changing times. Her creative world is filled with characters from all

corners of life but more or less having the same kind of temperament. Like her characters she also has a tone of sensitiveness. R. K. Srivastava mentions:

Being a sensitive woman novelist and gifted with good observation, sensitiveness, a penetrating analysis and a skill to paint with words, Anita Desai creates a rich gallery of characters, both male and female, though dominated by the latter.(p.xxxvii)

According to K. K. Ruthven, the central hypothesis of feminist literary criticism is that “gender is a crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary discourse.”(p.9) Anita Desai is one of such writers who is been given the credit of introducing the psychological novel in the way of Virginia Woolf in Indian Writing in English. Her writings bear the pioneer status of feminist issues. Though her works have not been classified by many as feminist today, she believes that her feminist style of writing goes parallel with the changing times.

The feminist movement in India is very new and a younger generation of readers in India tends to be rather impatient of my books and to think of them as books about completely helpless women, hopeless women. They find it somewhat unreal that the women don't fight back, but they don't seem to realize how very new this movement is.

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Being a sensitive novelist she associates more with the inner feelings and life of the characters. Her first novel was *Cry, the Peacock* which was published in 1963. She was only 26 years old then. It highlights the suppression and oppression of Indian women. It moves around the story of Maya, the protagonist who is a young, sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster. Anita Desai has gone deeper into the feminine psyche of Maya i.e. from childhood to youth and finally to her death.

Though Maya belongs to a very rich family her life is starved with emotions and she is passionately dissatisfied. Her husband Gautama is practical, industrious lawyer, humble but unsympathetic. While Maya longs for love and is full of emotions, Gautam is realistic and ignorant of Maya's feelings, Anita Desai has used the technique of stream of consciousness while blending the present with the past discourse of Maya. Eventually Maya is developed as a historical figure. The name Maya itself is quite symbolically put by Anita Desai which

stands for affection or illusion. *Cry, the Peacock* is a psychological novel. The story starts with the death of Maya's pet dog and Maya's mind is totally oppressed with the incident. She is always haunted with a fatal prediction and suffers from a continuous disturbed state of mind. When she was a child an astrologer had predicted that after the four years of her marriage, one of them would die. Since that time she became obsessed with the fear of death. After marriage she longs for a typical fatherly care and concern from her husband which is missing in her life and she suffers from father's obsession. Ultimately it leads to incompatible and disharmonious marriage.

Anita Desai's writings give a clear picture of her awareness of women problems from a psychic point of view. This literary skill has made her distinguished with exceptional sensibility and also makes her unique in the field of Indian English Literature. As a matter of fact she has added a new trend or era in the realm of psychological novel.

In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) Anita Desai has delineated the psyche of Nanda Kaul. The title of the novel is quite symbolical. Fire burns in the heart of an old lady, a great grandmother, Nanda Kaul, and the novel runs with the theme of her psychological condition of the self and the world around her. In this novel also Anita Desai has used the technique of stream of consciousness in describing the central theme. The story talks about three women characters Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. Nanda Kaul's delicate sensibility is repelled as well as fascinated by the pathetic incident occurred in the life of Ila Das when she is brutally raped and murdered. The novel highlights the psychological and corporal oppression to which women are victims and their sense of alienation and intense suffering is portrayed vividly with delicate observation on human nature. The novel pictures the revolution of the new generation of the feminine sensibility against the brutal man dominated world.

Anita Desai treats her women protagonists as individuals who find themselves dumped into unsuitable positions, struggling against the hurdles. This tragic issue between the individual and their unsuitable environment outlines the dimensions of existential anxiety. N. R. Gopal writes:

Anita Desai adds a new dimension to English fiction by concentrating on the exploration of this troubled sensibility a typical modern Indian phenomenon. In contrast to her in Jhabwala's work the social background is rather more important than the characters, in Kamala Markandaya's works the emphasis is as much on the principal characters as on matters-economic, political, social and cultural. Nayantara Sahgal while

dealing with social problems, confines herself to a particular social class, namely the upper class and the aristocracy. Anita Desai thus clearly stands ahead the group in as much as she introduces a shift of ideational focus from the outer to the inner part of human existence. Her novels focus on the inner climate, the climate of sensibility. Her main concern is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at some crucial juncture of their lives. To sustain her effort she has forged a style supple and suggestive enough, to convey the fever and fretfulness, to recode the eddies and currents in the stream of consciousness of her characters.(p.4)

The feminist emancipation is one of the chief elements in the novels of Anita Desai. Quest for identity and due position to women are the main focus of her writings. In her literary creative she has given due emphasis on the struggles and difficulties of everyday living as well as suppression of middle class Indian women. In the words of R. K. Gupta:

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* presents a study of trauma of a housewife, the trauma that takes refuge in seclusion. The life-long faithlessness of Mr Kaul to Nanda Kaul and the hypocritical situation force her to avow this severance. Nanda Kaul has conceded this after passing through psychic suffering and bitter experiences of a marital life. (p.106)

In Anita Desai's writings one would easily get the picture of Indian as well as universal touch in their scope and relevance pertaining to human condition. Going deeper in to the inner psyche of her women characters, Anita Desai explains the intricate facts of human existence and experience based upon the psychic tensions taking place in individual lives in the family and society. She has been successful in making a humble attempt to

globalize the local Indian theme i.e. woman, her alienation, solitude and psyche in a patriarchal society.

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