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Existential and Psychological Cognizance in the Novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract:

Anita Desai is one of India's foremost novelists. She focuses her attention on the fundamental problems of existence rather than on attaining easy goals in life. She is well known as a great artist in her art of successful characterization and portrayal of profound psychological insight, that is, the inner self of the protagonists. Her deep interest in women characters and their reactions to the various aspects of life adds a new dimension to her novels. She depicts female characters that live in a separate, closed and sequestered world of existential problems and predicaments. Not only does she excel in delineating these feminine characters, but she also makes a psychological study to lay bare the innermost feelings of these women. Desai explores the themes of existential conflicts, psychological maladaptation and loss of belonging, pain and predicament of women, disharmonious marital relationships, problems of immigration and decadence of traditions in her novels. In this article, an attempt has made to assess the role of psychological cognizance of the protagonists' and their existential stability despite external as well as internal conflicts.

Keywords: Existential, psychological, alienation, predicament.

Introduction:

Anita Desai holds a significant place in modern Indian English novels. She has penned sixteen works of fiction, including *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (199), all of which were shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Born in Mussoorie to a German mother and a Bengali father, she was educated in Delhi and currently divides her time between the USA, Mexico and India. Born and raised in a multicultural background she got the golden opportunity to encourage and excel to rich at the pinnacle of life in literature. A fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London, the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York, Girton College and Clare Hall at the University of Cambridge and the receiver of the Sahitya Akademi in India. Anita Desai has also been a Professor of Writing at MIT and has frequently been honoured with awards. Among them the Alberto Moravia Prize for Literature and the Padma Shri awards are included.

Analysis And Discussion:

What imparts individuality to her novels is the psychological depth of her characters brought out in a language that is equal to the task. Themes like alienation, inter-cultural relationship, individual/family conflict etc. have been taken up by her in her novels. When it comes to the exploration of the individual psyche, most studies underline the negative elements of existentialist thinking like alienation, rootlessness, normlessness, etc., that have highlighted by her. What is glossed over is a particular urge felt by her protagonists to lead an authentic life. Kierkgard remarks, “When man chooses from inward passion rather than external consequences, does he become truly an existential self” (Paul 234).

Anita Desai is rated as a great artist in her art of successful characterization and portrayal of deep psychological insight, that is, the inner self of the protagonists. Her deep interest in women characters and their reactions to the various aspects of life adds a new dimension to her novels. She depicts female characters that live in a separate, closed and sequestered world of existential problems and predicaments. Not only does she excel in delineating these feminine characters but also makes a psychological study to lay bare the innermost feelings of these women. In fact, she designs the exploration of the disturbed psyche of Indian women and portrays their loneliness and alienation. The woman in her fictional world

is in a ceaseless quest for a meaningful life not only for herself, but also for humanity in general. In this context, Usha Bande aptly observes: "Anita Desai's characters reveal her vision of life; they share her perceptions, project a search for identity and also pursuit of freedom" (*The Novels of Anita Desai*, 22).

Anita Desai's novels are the manifesto of female predicament. Her preoccupation with the woman's world, frustration and storm rising inside her mind intensifies her predicament. In fact, Desai's concern with the emancipation of women is found page after page in her novels. She has presented the plight and predicament of sensitive women characters, who find it very difficult to adjust to the present mechanical and urbanized set-up. She sincerely broods over the fate and future of modern women. She has explored different aspects of feminine psyche like man-woman dichotomy, their very personal relations, presentation of neurotic characters etc. In fact, most of her novels are study of feminine psyche, which include women of all ages.

It is pertinent to note here that Anita Desai makes her own choice in portraying various characters; they are always selected from those women who have been subjected to social injustice and mental or psychological torture. Regarding the choice of her characters, Desai rightly observes:

I am interested in characters who are not average, but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made a stand against, the general current... But those who cannot follow it, whose hearts cry out 'the Great No', who fight with the current and struggle against it; they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them. (An Interview with Anita Desai 13)

In all of her major fictional works like *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of Day*, and *Fasting. Feasting*, she lays equal emphasis on the feminine characters and takes interest in projecting the essential features that dominate the characters.

Maya, the female protagonist in the novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, is delicately delineated by Anita Desai. She experiences and feels more intensely than it is desirable. We can trace Maya's psychotic problem to her very childhood. The little Maya grows up mal-nourished in the sense

that she was nurtured without her other. Though she belongs to a wealthy and aristocratic Brahmin family, has a well to-do husband but is emotionally starved. Her problems are both physical and psychic. The sense of guilt that she is the cause of the death of her mother gets rooted in her subconscious mind. The loss of her mother strands her in misery and she harbours, hostility towards her, who is the cause of this misery. This hostility remains fixed in her mind, which later develops into anxiety and neurosis. The fact is that Maya is a motherless child, delicate and sensitive, goes a long way in shaping her tragedy. Her father is a benevolent despot under whose shadow she grows. Maya's father is a perfectionist who orders his thoughts, his life, his learning and his career into a set pattern. Hence, Maya compares his perfection to a "Moghul Garden" (75).

Maya, as a beautiful young lady, always craves for love and sexual pleasure. But Gautama always tries his best to flee from it. No doubt sex is not only an intensely pleasurable experience, but it can act as a revitalizing force as a revitalizing force in an otherwise sterile life. Freud views sex as the prototype of all pleasurable experiences of life. Hence in the context, Maya's earth-bound nature is well inclined to derive the fullest satisfaction from this intimate experience. But frustrated by Gautama's coldness, Maya tries to sexualize her surroundings, as a way of displacement.

The alienation from her husband is oppressive. She sighs and feels extremely sad. She lies in her bed comfortlessly and hears the cries of peacock coming from the wilds:

Before they mate, they fight. They will rip each other's breasts to strips and fall, bleeding with their beaks open and panting. When they have exhausted themselves in battle, they will mate. Peacocks are wise. The hundred eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death, and know them to be one. 'Lover, Lover you will hear them cry in the forests, when the rain-clouds come, lover I die'... (*Cry, The Peacock*, 83).

Here Anita Desai has highlighted the female predicament in various aspects. She excels, particularly in elaborating the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women tortured by negligence and loneliness.

In her next novel, *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai presents another image of woman through the character of Monisha, whose sufferings, unlike Maya of *Cry, the Peacock*, is her own creation. Her extraordinary power of perception, as it is usual with Anita Desai's heroines, endows her with sharp reactions against the changing social values and ethical degradation. Apart from her, two other voices, of Nirode and Amla, are presented to bring out the exact quality of the character. It appears that like Jane Austen, Desai is also interested in comparative characterization. Gilbert Ryle aptly puts her view:

Anita Desai pinpoints the exact quality of character in which she is interested and the exact degree of that quality, by matching it against the same quality in different degrees, against the simulations of that quality, against the deficiencies of it, and against qualities which though different in the case of brothers or cousins of that selected quality (Jane Austen and the Moralists 108).

The novel has attained extraordinary effects due to superb delineation of three highly sensitive souls, caught in the cross-currents of changing values Psychoanalysis, the forte of Desai, once again is in free display. The novel reveals the deep painful cry of the woman protagonist, Monisha, crying for her lost self and brutally tortured by the trauma of existence. The three chief voices are nothing but the varied nuances of Maya's cry. In fact, in the tired voices of Nirode, Monisha and Amla, Anita Desai tries to portray the fierce struggle of individual's facing, single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence"(*An Interview with Anita Desai* 47).

It is noteworthy that Monisha's narcissism weakens her zest for life. She advises her brother, Nirode to cast away all involvement and to remain totally alone. The advice is more significant for herself than for her brother. Love is the forbidden fruit which may awaken her conscience. But in a moment of vision, she feels it all wrong. In fact, Monisha cannot love Jivan and his family members sincerely and honestly, because of their indifference towards her,

Anita Desai employs the metaphor of the city to convey the two selves of Monisha. The city of Calcutta has two faces: one rapacious and the other weary. Likewise, Monisha has two

selves -one 'glorified' and the other 'actual'. Her actual self is weary, but the glorified is rapacious. Her real self is symbolized by the 'Bleeding Hearts of Dove'-caged and wounded. Another suggestive imagery is that of a criss-cross bar and the windows. Physically, she is trapped behind these, but psychologically, her authentic self is shut behind the barred exigencies of her glorified self. When charged of theft, Monisha's glorified self-suffers and her image receives a shattering blow.

Among other women characters of the novel, *Voices in the City*, Amla stands prominent. Of course, Amla is assigned a secondary place in the novel, but she is also portrayed as a shadow of her neurotic feelings. She is the youngest of the Raj family, but holds some importance in the plot of the novel. Desai has portrayed Amla's character with lucidity and delicacy. Socially, she is caught in the whirl of Calcutta which excites her initially and disgruntles her later on. Psychologically, Amla is a brilliant portraiture of a rebellious young woman who is eager to master life and triumph over every obstacle. She is young, smart, optimistic and vivacious in spirit. Her ambitious pursuit drags her through various psychic situations till finally she establishes a contact with her real self and achieves equanimity. As a stalwart character, Amla resolves that she would not allow herself to get lost like her sister, Monisha. The novelist depicts: "She knew that Monisha's death had pointed the way for her and would never allow her to lose herself(248). This is, indeed, the starting point of her awakening. The wound accelerates the process and gives her a final view of ultimate reality. Prior to this, she passes through a period of bewilderment, grappling with self-idealization and self-realization.

In her novel, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Anita Desai projects altogether a different role and picture of woman. Sarah, the chief woman character, is painted as a lifeless dull without spectacular depth and insight. This book deals with the novelist's experiment with the love-hate relationship of expatriates. Sarah, the protagonist of the novel suffers from loneliness, alienation due to her choice of marry an Indian, Dev by name. Her sense of alienation is different from that Monisha or Nanda Kaul as it is deliberate and intentional.

Anita Desai displays her superb skill of presentation in dealing with the psyche of Sarah. Sarah's anguish is the anguish of loneliness. Torn between East and West, she is simply an epitome of misery and hardship. Her reaction is more against racial discrimination than against the dreariness of the physical world.

One of the major heroines of Anita Desai is Sita in the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* This novel also displays the incredible, extraordinary and outstanding artistic talent of the art of characterization of the novelist. In this novel, Desai reverts to her forte of probing into the consciousness and emotional reactions of an introvert and a sensitive woman, Sita who is bored and frustrated by her commonplace and humdrum life and tries to escape into the isolated "island of Manori". Here the novelist deals with the predicament of sensitive Sita, who like Maya and Monisha searches frantically the love of a mother, but manages somehow to face the heat of reality by uttering "Great No" to the male hegemony of Indian society.

Anita Desai delineates Sita as a pessimistic and whimsical victim of the situation. In fact, she is unaccountable and uncongenial and her ultra-mundane sensations are of her own making. Her first entrance into her father-in-law's 'age-rotted' flat infuriates her to revolt against their 'sub-human placidity' and 'sluggishness.' She is bold enough to declare war against conventionalism and accepted facts-of -life.

Turning to her next novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, it is found that Anita Desai sets on to probe into the problematic life of an elderly lady, Nanda Kaul, the protagonist of the novel who has unsuccessfully cried out her Great 'No' to life. It is sheer weariness or mental fatigue prompts Nanda to move away from the world of domestic duty and responsibility. Indeed, she is created not out of a leisurely fancy, but for more scrutiny, to open the shutters of pathetic sheltered life at Carignano in Kasauli, a pretty hill-station near Shimla.

A woman in the role of a mother is assumed to acquire a specific status in society. Motherliness becomes an arena for woman wherein she can realize herself. It gives her a special status and some value. By acknowledging the boredom and tedium of marital and maternal life, women like Nanda Kaul and Sita are going against the trend. They put questions what the tradition decreases. Their maternal concerns have overshadowed their concerns. In fact, Nanda Kaul's choice of Carignano amidst 'stark and barren' Kasauli reflects the mood of renunciation of the old lady. In the cause of the renunciation, there lies profound disillusionment and unhappiness. Having suffered immense injuries throughout her life, Nanda Kaul now decides to shun away all acquaintances and relatives.

In her next experimental fiction, *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai seems to be exploring the psyche of a compromising, educated and articulate woman than her earlier characters. Bimala or Bim in *Clear Light of Day* suffers from existential crisis as bitterly as Desai's earlier female

protagonists. However, like Sita she gathers sufficient courage to face the ferocious assaults of reality.

Bim, the protagonist of the novel is an exciting study of the self in transition. Although she is often unsteady, oscillating at the initial stage of the novel, but in the end she discovers the structure of her own consciousness's and achieves wholeness. She has realized much pain and predicament of existence which has hit her hard.

At the end of the novel, Bim is all set to have an aesthetic experience and a look towards inner self. The moment of awakening has enriched her Vision. Now she feels the existential angst: "Man is not what he is, and he is what he is not"(165). As a matter of fact, this renewed vision implies the acceptance of the inner core of her being. The moment has come when she hears the call of her inner self in the stillness of solitude. Bim transcends, awakens from the burden of the past and prepares her for the final aesthetic pleasure offered by the music concert at Misras', their neighbours. Through this experience of aesthetic pleasure in music, she comprehends the eternal unity.

Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* has rocked the world, reflecting the women in India and abroad. The novelist emphasises on the character delineation of Uma, the woman protagonist than, that of Aruna, her younger sister. Nevertheless, it is not possible to analyze the character of Uma ignoring the historical time she is placed in. Moreover, Uma, Aruna, Arun, along with their parents, so called 'Mama-Papa' belong to the oriental world. The story of the novel has a little focus on the western world housed by Melanie and Rod. The two worlds represent the diverse ways of geographical cultures in which the self grows.

As a matter of fact, Uma's childhood carries equal importance for a correct assessment of her character. Her sufferings, misfortunes, inferiority complex, castration complex, and the resultant epileptic fit account for her ill upbringing. Furthermore, her hopes and frustrations, pains and reliefs, weakness and strength, fasting and feasting revolve round her 'Mama-Papa'. It appears that Uma lives for them, with them and by them. In fact, the parents have been portrayed lucidly through the eyes of Uma. The very term 'Mama-Papa' signifies the characteristic portrait of someone losing one's identity in someone or for someone. Uma's vision encompasses a painful sublimation on the part of her mother who serves her husband with complacency, neglecting her children.

Conclusion:

To sum up, Anita Desai is a great analyst of the human mind, a creator of brilliant characters, and an astute interpreter of life. She presents a gallery of vivid and realistic portraits in her novels. When we grasp her characters' psychology, we begin to visualize them as humans with their weaknesses and potentialities. The novel outlook on life presented by Desai is due to the force of her expression and ideology. We sympathize with Maya, Nirode, Monisha, Nanda Kaul, Rake, Sita, Deven, Adit, Dev, Bim, Hari, Lila and others because they are in search of a deeper, fuller meaning of life and through the power of her words. Anita Desai has made them reverberate the very impulses we feel within ourselves. Desai has evoked positive responses from her readers. They have acclaimed her as a great artist whose writings reveal inner realities and psychic of her characters. Her forte is the exploration of sensibility and existentialism.

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