

# Feminine Psyche in the Novels of Anita Desai

Anita Desai

## CASE STUDY:

The scene of Indian writing in English today is marked with rare creative energy, which has been making waves in the literary world. Till the decades of the fifties and early sixties, Indian writing was more or less an imitation of the west. The highbrow, aristocratic and the writers either ignored or overlooked the middle and lower class of society, which were and are the pulsating realities of India. The reason perhaps, was insufficient exposure to the creative artists dominating the scene in those days. Moreover, the literary background of the writer was profoundly influenced by British and American literatures. Not that influence of the Western world was in any way detrimental to the growth of Indo-Anglican writing, the writer of the day could not get effectively involved with the issue the society and naked realities of life.

Probably, the growing social and intellectual awareness in Indian society created a suitable climate for native approach to literature. The writer, instead of looking for inspiration outside his country, now began to look around himself. The people on the streets, in fields, in households and offices gave writer much food for thought and literary metaphor was deeply underlined with native consideration. Moreover, the easily available facilities for mass communication gave the writer an access to the fast changing social, economical and political atmosphere at home as well as abroad. It is in this active and creatively bustling environment that we find serious and committed artists like Anita Desai and others working to depict the subtle nuance of human behavior.

Loneliness, they deal with the terror of facing single handed, ferocious assault of existence. She believes in death as the ultimate fact of life and the prime impulse behind her fiction is existential predicament rooted in awareness of death. The four major themes, persistently used by Anita Desai are; death and violence, East-west encounter, man-woman relationship, and loneliness. Her first two novels, *Cry the Peacock*, and *Voices in the City*, deal with death and violence, while the third novel, *Bye Bye Blackbird*, is the only one dealing with the theme of East- West encounter. The rest of her books deal with the themes of Man-Woman relationship and loneliness her

favorite subject. Anita Desai's popularity is not so much due to the choice of her themes as their treatment by her. By writing about the miserable plight of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands, she has given a new dimension to the Indian novel in English by turning from outer to inner reality. Solitude is necessary for a peaceful life which Anita Desai has employed in its every novel. Anita Desai thus tries to introduce a modern psychological vein and projects a sensibility generally not encountered in other Indo-Anglican writers of fiction. As a novelist her distinguishing qualities are many, the chief among them being the subordination of background to the characters and the deft handling of language, imagery and syntax in order to convey an intimate expression of inner world of her characters. The moving description of loneliness leaves a lasting impression on the reader's mind: Maya, Nirode, Amla, Monisha, Sita, Nanda Kaul ---- all suffer from a sense of isolation that is not merely physical but also psychic.

A writer dealing with the psychological aspects of characters has employed a certain design by which the inner working of the protagonist's mind is unfolded to the readers gradually with the progress of the narrative. As in the case of her themes and her characters, Anita Desai's plot too are not repetitive. Each book has an individual structural pattern of its own. However, all the mechanisms she employs tend to work a unique harmony where incidents, people, situation combine to produce an artistic whole. One can say that Anita Desai plots are not so much deliberate contrivances as natural and inevitable outgrowths of the themes and perspectives. As the story advances in each her novels, she seems to be quietly sliding in her scenes, setting and characters, without much of advance preparation. As her forte is the psychic presentation of individual human beings, the narrative is rightly allowed to move freely and not clogged by blocks and patterns artificially imposed from outside. But it is not as if there is no subtlety or control in plot structure. The plot is always simple and neat enough so as not to impede the psychological revelation, and it is always well defined enough to present her vision clearly. Her plot structure therefore, shows a splendid fusion of from expression, contrivance and spontaneity.

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In Desai's stories action is subordinate to psychology and central themes revolve around the mental and spiritual developments of the 'dramatic personae', not on their physical adventures. She has explored the psyche of both the childless woman as of Maya in 'cry the peacock' Monisha in 'voices in the city' and also of women with children, like Sita in 'where shall we go this summer and Nanda Kaul in 'Fire on the mountain'. The interesting thing to note is that Anita Desai has portrayed the psyche of 'unwomanly woman' in the sense that they don't want children and certainly they are as 'unsexed' as lady Macbeth was. In different novels, Anita Desai has portrayed different facets of feminine psyche and her range of characters in this regard is quite wide. Her characters cover women of almost all age groups, in Raka we have child going to girlhood. Like these novelists, her forte is also the exploration of interior world, plunging into the limitless depth of mind and bringing into relief the hidden contours of human psyche. It is depth which attracts her, she remarks: "it is depth which is interesting, delving deeper and deeper in a character or situation rather than going about it".<sup>3</sup>

Desai is concerned exclusively with the personal tragedy of individual and has tried to portray the tragedy of human souls trapped in adverse circumstances of life, and the tragedy effect is intensified because the external conditions not only oppress the protagonists from outside but also flaw their nature from within. Her novels are about human fate, bewilderment, suffering and loneliness, in an interview she stated: "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 to stand against the general current".<sup>4</sup>

For Desai, each character is an embodiment of some unexplained mystery which the novelist wants to peel and unravel layer by layer. The innermost psyche of her protagonists is revealed to us through their interaction with those who are emotionally related to them on the basis of kinship for the purpose of fiction. No human relationship is more fertile and potential than that in the family and specially among the kins. She knows this crucial fact and that is why her novels depicts such relationship as they are based on emotional idealism. She is not an idealist, she is simply a recorder of the situation, but the emotional crises among kins are born of the realization that all the kins fall short of the ideal in such relationships and this fact is substantiated by almost all of her novels.

Her novel, 'cry the Peacock' is concerned with the dissonance and disharmony that disrupts the marital relationship between Maya and Gautama. 'The voices in

the city' depicts the disintegration of Nirode's, Monisha's and Amla's lives caused by imbalance in familial ties. 'Bye Bye Blackbird' shreds to pieces the hypothesis that East and West can never meet to form lasting equations. Sarah and Aditi care about each other's happiness even at the cost of being marginalized and condemned to live in two societies and in two, not merely different, but antagonistic cultures. 'Where shall we go this summer?' emphasizes the universal need for human ties with Sita awakening to the fact that even sky and earth other near the horizon. 'Fire on the mountain' conveys the message that running away from human contact or one's kin is not a desirable proposition. Thus the above references indicate the nature and thematic thrust of Desai's novels. She feels privacy for all else is linked to it: contemplation, intuition, visionary sense, and finally critical faculty. "Only the individual, the solitary being is of the interest, one must be alone, silent in order to think or contemplate or write".<sup>4</sup> It is necessary for a while to live without words if words are to acquire any meaning, to use the language of silence, if speech is to be made effective. She strongly believes: "all humans relationship are inadequate, and basically everyone is solitary".<sup>5</sup>

The involvement in human relationship in this world invariably leads to disaster and loneliness of her characters is the outcome of this inadequacy of human relationship. Her protagonists are mostly lonely woman, who have reached different stages in life and fragile introverts "trapped in their own skins". They are hypersensitive introspective, loneliness is present in its varying shades and meaning in her work and there is a striving at a more authentic way of life than the one which is available to them. There is need to be loved --- almost all her heroines desire this above all else, but they resist surrender and involvement. Desai's concern with the portrayal of psychological reality makes her characters peculiar and eccentric rather than general. Anita Desai has emerged as a powerful interpreter of deeply underlying forces of human being. Her writing significantly underscore the complexities of human relationships with intense emotions almost reach a philosophical height, when she becomes acutely concerned about human existence.

Desai has been making significant contribution to Indo-Anglican fiction in experimenting with themes of inner consciousness. Primarily interested in exploring the psychic depth and loneliness of her female characters, she may said to be doing something unique among the contemporary Indo-Anglican fiction writers. Her preoccupation is with inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action. Srinivasa Iyengar observes that in Desai's novels: "the inner climate, the climate of

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sensibility..... is more compelling than outer reality”.1 Her primary interest lies more in “the interior landscape of mind than political and social realities”.2 Without getting into any language of interior to deal with inner climate or the interior landscape of her character’s minds, through this language she has recorded the stream of consciousness of her main characters.

Desai has accepted that when she first began to work seriously and consciously on her novels, it was D.H.Lawrence, Virginia woolf, Henry James and Marcel Proust, who said that her characters are mostly married woman. Lotte a middle aged women while Nande kaul and Ila das are old woman, not only they are women of different age groups , but they are also of different types and traits. If Monisha is an intellectual type, Maya is hypersensitive, Sarla in ‘In custody’ is a character , who cannot look beyond the four walls of her house. Even though wife of a Hindi lecturer, she is so ignorant that she attributes her husband’s frequent visits to Delhi to interview the poet as a ruse for meeting his girl-friend. In ‘Voices in the city’ we also find subtle suggestions of adultery between the widow mother of Monisha and the retired Major Chadha. Thus, it may be said that Anita Desai’s novels unravel various facet of feminine psyche from the viewpoint of an author, who records her observations with a mind that is endowed with the capacity to feel intensely.

#### REFERENCES

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- [5] ‘Interview’ by Jasbir Jain, 67.
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