



# The Theme of Feminism and the Feminine-Psyche with its Further Exploration in the Novels of Anita Desai

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**Abstract**—Anita Desai speaks softly and her observations on life and writing are unsentimental, which is perhaps why she admires Rabindranath Tagore and Virginia Woolf — there is Woolf in the background, she remains the standard setter for me. In Anita Desai novels, we have portrayal of different facets of feminine psyche which covers women of all age's groups, but they are nothing but gripping and enticing stories of women sufferings in the male dominated society. Beneath the calm surface you sense the violence, with women on the edge, like widows who die of drink, or devouring characters. Thus, we can see that through these fascinating characterisations, she has done enough in exploring various facets of feminine psyche. Anita Desai is one of those few Indian novelists in English who have tried to understand closely the predicament of their female characters.

**Keywords**— Existentialism, Feminine-Psyche, Movement, Male-Domination, Predicament.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, a novelist, short-story writer and children's author, was born in 1937 in Mussoorie, India. She was educated at Delhi University. Her novels include *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), which won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, and *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), each of which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Girton College, Cambridge and Clare Hall, Cambridge. Desai is widely praised as the finest of her generation of Indian writers in English, and one of few who had an international reputation, alongside RK Narayan, before the post-Rushdie wave of the 80s and 90s. She was twice shortlisted for the Booker prize for the novels many think her best: *Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody*. Her oeuvre has explored the lives of outsiders within Indian society and, more recently, also within the West. Her fiction has covered themes such as women's oppression and quest for a fulfilling identity, family relationship and contrasts, the crumbling of traditions, and anti-Semitism. The Eurocentric and social biases that are sometimes detected in her fiction, therefore, may be more productively read as the result of the author's focus on uprooted and marginalized identities. Desai's novels and short-stories evoke characters, events and moods with recourse to a rich use of visual imagery and details, which has led to comparisons with the modernist sensibilities of T. S.

Eliot, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. The origin of her stories, as the writer explains, is itself rooted in images:

There are so many images that remain in the mind but they often are also forgotten, they pass through one's life and then they vanish. But there are certain images, certain characters, certain words that you find you don't lose, you remember, they stay with you and eventually these come together, you begin to see what the connection is between them.

## II. FEMINISM AS A MOVEMENT

About two centuries back, Jane Austen, as a writer painted out about relentless suppression of female emotions and the constraints, they have been going:

Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree: the pen has been in their hands. [1]

[Jane Austen - Persecution]

The old conventional notions of male dominated society were so rude, unbearable, suppressive, oppressive and depressive that women's discourse takes a shape of movement. The feminist movement is committed to understanding and improving the situation of women all over the world.

Alice Jardine herself offers a definition of feminism:

Feminism, she writes, is generally understood as a movement from the point of view of, by and for women. [2]

Toril Moi defines:

Feminism as a political position, femaleness as a matter of biology and femininity as a set of culturally determined characteristics. The two words feminist and feminism are political labels supporting the aims of women's movement of the 1960s. [3]

In simple words, feminism means the proverb which advocates for woman's complete equality with men in all spheres of life-size political, social, legal, economic, familial, cultural, academic, etc. and the feminist movement as an organised effort for achieving such an equality and rights for women.

Anita Desai is one of those few Indian novelists in English who have tried to understand closely the predicament of their female characters. In her review of Amitabh Ghosh's, *The Circle of Reason*, she displays her disfavour for the novelist who take



interest in -the outer rather than the -inner world, preferring the social to the psychological novel. [4]

Anita Desai, herself contributes psychic novels, which she narrates as purely subjective. She rightly analyses her psychological feelings and she says:

It has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solicitude required for the writing of such novels, thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends upon observations rather than a private vision. [5]

Her forte is the irresistible quest of sensibility and her captivating stories layered off the innermost realities lies beneath the surface of eternal rock in all her novels, including psychic echoes of her character. We find in her stories that all-encompassing themes, of –

The hazards and complexities of man- woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of Individualism.

[6]

A prominent Indo English writer, has chosen a language English for the exploration of feminine sensibility. She represents –

The welcome creative release of the feminine sensibility which began to emerge after the World War second. [7]

### III. FEMINISM SWAY IN MODERN NOVELS

Anita Desai happens to be the leading voice among a number of women novelists who by peculiar situation of their existence become witness of the Indian complexities too closely indeed. We rather have stories about the customary strains of rural portrayal of financially constraints people, caste and class conflict in her fiction, but she has fascinating stories to narrate about individuals, who have to traverse a tumultuous path, too treacherous to deal with. She, therefore, had fostered a desire for delineating human relationship and she often takes to uncertain ways under different situations become more interested in its analysis, therefore a recorder of dilemma faced by an individual which are much apparent in the modern society and make vivid the predicament of the individual at its psychological level. She is not an idealist but simply a recorder of the situations in the portrayal of human relationship.

The comparative achievement of Anita Desai becomes clear when we notice that her fellow women writers like Ruth Jhabawala, Shanta Ramarao, Kamala Markandaye and Atiya Hussain scarcely portray and hardly delve deep into the surface of the psychic elements involved in these themes in their entirety. Anita Desai explores a new horizon and adds a different dimension to English fiction by concentrating on the exploration of this troubled sensibility. She thus stands as a pioneer ahead the group in as much as she brings a shift of Ideational focus from the outward gross realities to inward complexities of human existence. She is on her own succeeds in evolving a technique, devise a model, which suits to communicate the ordeal in which the individuals are mixed

deeply in her fictions. She insists an analysing her characters and makes each work of hers a haunting exploration of psychic self through a system in the form of *Existentialism*.

In the 50s and 60s Existentialist Philosophy had become quite fashionable among the progressive urban intellectuals. Mrs Desai finds its theories suitable to her themes. Aspects of Existentialism are in evidence in total framework of her stories. Its emphasis on the alienation of man from an absurd world, his consequent estrangement from normal society, and his recognition of the world as negative and meaningless- presents the sensitive individual, fragmented and spiritually destroyed by the particular social conditions of life, a life complex enough to make him obsessed. This particular phase of existentialism- *the one alone, the man has no record*, - seems to be a favourite subject to Desai. [8]

With her early childhood nurtured in the world of Brontes, she had imbibed depth and have of the fiction writers of the West. At the age of nine she had read *Wuthering Heights*. Ever since, literature interested her most. In her thoughts she read the novels of Lawrence, Woolf, James, and Proust which exerted deep influence on her. More recently she read Kawabata and more and more modern poetry particularly that of Rimbaud, Hopkin and Lawrence- which deeply influenced her novels.

These western novelists and poets suited her purpose and she make like them, the use of flashbacks and stream of consciousness technique in some of her novels. [8]

Anita Desai presented her themes organically with precise adjustment and adaptations in spheres of style and perception. By deft management of her writing skill of unerring precision, she succeeds in attaining her comparative superiority over other Indian women novelist writing in English.

### IV. FEMININE PSYCHE

In the novels of Desai, we generally find characters all-encompassing neurotic females, highly sensitive but sequestered in a world of whimsical dream, alienated from their outer world of their surroundings as consequence of their failure or unwillingness to cope up with the reality and often having contrarian views from others and in an effort to escape from situation of intolerable loneliness and embark on sojourn of contemplation in other to discover the true meaning of their existence.

The moving description of loneliness leaves a long-lasting impression on the reader's mind: *Maya, Nirode, Amla, Manisha, Sarah, Sita, Nanda Kaul*, - all suffers from a sense of isolation that is not merely physical but also psychic. What is more, their respective personality traits and attitudes also determine the mental and emotional effect of their isolation. [8]

In the case of *Maya*, in a state of utter isolation far more fearsome. Through her cry there reverberates the anguish of acute loneliness.



I am in a, fever, Stop me! Silence me! or I will fly on; fly up at you through you past you, and away. For I am ill. I am in a fever, God, in a fever. [9]

Her characters build a large spectrum of multifarious dimensions of human nature. Her style, unique in its own way, suited to her requirements in portraying a, distinct characters. So that each novel becomes a unique, world in miniature epic of human relationship by presenting individuals who cut themselves off in different grains from others.

The rise of feminism as a movement began with the vital question that portrayal of women by male artists must be deficient for, even the prominent male writers is by no means equipped to give an authentic rendering of the female sensibility and women as the subject, have hardly been vindicated their rightful authority in the male writings. Thus, this in turn, compelled women novelist to give their own side of the story especially from their own perspective. Women writers of all ages have a natural preference for writing about women characters. Anita Desai, is no exception as she contributed mostly by delineating about characters of all ages, transcending the class barrier of society all across her novels. Such characters of women represent woman's mind and psyche beneath the surface of myriad moods and nuances. If at one extreme, we have the most sensitive women characters, on the other extreme we also get to see thick skinned women with blunt sensibility.

As in *Cry the Peacock*, which is a novel mainly preoccupied with the theme of discordant relationship between husband and wife relationship. The novel begins with the death of Maya's pet dog *Toto*, this makes matter worse. This event upsets Maya so terribly that she is off her mental balance. Being childless she is much attached to the day and it seems that the dog was a child substitute.

Childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets, they say. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child, no less worthy of reverence, and agonised remembrance. [10]

Anita Desai not only explores and portrays the feminine psyche of a common woman but also of the subnormal bordering on abnormal woman: introvert and hypersensitive because of various factors which drive them to undergo so much of mental stress not to be called insane, but then certainly not totally normal as well. They give us an idea of Anita Desai's art if reading woman's psychic self.

*Voices in the City*, is the fascinating narration of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the waves of changing values. A story about values feudal family of Kalimpong dominated by the mother with an inferior father who is most of the time drunk with four children: Arun, Nirode, Manisha, and Amla. Desai portrayed feminine psyche mainly through the character of *Manisha*, who is similar to *Maya* in that way as she is also childless, sensitive and a victim of ill matched marriage with an overbearing plight of sterility, which is a stigma for married women, even today. Through *Manisha* portrayal, she painted a picture of a wretched woman psyche but of a sensitive intellectual woman who is suffocated with a stifling discontent in uncongenial atmosphere of her in laws' house. Because of her intellectual

nature, she is not much interested in religion her plight and anguish would have been lessen a bit more but it is not the case as she scribbles in her diary:

If I had religious faith, I could easily enough renounce all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to, and so I must stay. The family here, and their surroundings, tell me such a life cannot be lived - a life dedicated to nothing- that his husk is a protection from death. [11]

Her imminent by suicide lurking over the novel all along and has been beautifully described by Anita Desai even before her actual death which arrives in the later part of the novel.

*Sita* in *Where shall we go this Summer* also suffers from ill matched marriage. She is irrational, childish, a fractious and petulant, in a way quite grumpy as well. She becomes upset even after reading newspaper full of the news of brutality, horrendous crimes and violence all over the place. Being sensitive to such news is one thing but to be disturbed and visibly affected by it so terribly to the point that it hinders to lead a normal life visit a different thing altogether in her aspect which is bordering on mental disease. In the novel, we also have evidence about other Instances as well where some other trivial things easily upset *Sita*'s calm and composure.

Even the usual fighting between the children of her own, annoys her severely. This made her screams on them. [12]

*Sita* in the novel declined at the idea of giving birth to a fifth child on his husband insistence. This upset her to an extent that she retrieved herself back into her psyche of childhood days on the magic island and started living in the world of fantasy. Through the character of *Sita* in *Where shall we go this Summer*, Desai has portrayed diligently the feminine psyche of neurotic women, not normal but might be categorised in the league of subnormal.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, *Raka*, the girl occupies all our attention, the novel mainly revolves around her and the central character *Nanda Kaul*. However, in the course of the novel the focus shifts particularly on to *Raka* and the title also refers to her, for it is she who sets the forest ablaze, hence, *Fire on the Mountain*. She is an unusual child unlike of her physical features:

*Raka*, what an utter misnomer through *Nanda Kaul*.... *Raka* meant the moon, but this child was not round faced, calm of radiant..... *Nanda Kaul* though she looked like on those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin precarious leg. [13]

*Raka* is so self-absorbed, the most in children like child, who never played games. She is obliquely defiant and the mistress of herself, roaming in the desolate hills and forest rather she despised the idea of listening fanciful tales from her *Nani*. *Nanda Kaul*, who is absolutely independent too like *Raka* who also defends her privacy fiercely. *Raka*, her introvert nature is the outcome of unpleasant memory of her traumatic childhood days of her drunken father coming home late at night and beating her mother while she was hiding somewhere in the room, witnessing all the horrible things,



which took place in the home routinely and unchecked. This traumatic experience has such a dehumanising effect on *Raka*'s mind that her refusal to play with toys which is so natural tendency with the children, describes her bruised psyche as a child but unlike the child. She is a fine study of a disturbed child, withdrawn and isolated and on the verge of pyromania where she puts the forest on fire. Hence, the title of the novel.

On the other extreme of the exploration and portrayal of feminine psyche is the character of the senile *Meera Mari* in *Clear Light of the Day*, is an equally gripping story with exciting characterisation. In this, *Meera Mari*, is a widow, a distant relative of *Dasa*'s though she is a minor, but in her we find yet another instance of sexually unsatisfied women, who became widow at young age and who picks the habit of drinking alcohol even to the point of stealing it when she does not have it.

In her *Baumgartner's Bombay*, she depicted the character of *Lotte*, where we find another aspect of feminine psyche that of a Kept. She is the Kept of Calcutta based *Margarita Seth*, *Kantilal* who comes periodically to her for booze and sex, but in her depicting years she initiates a sexual relationship with Baumgartner. With this novel, Anita Desai touched upon a very vital aspect of the feminine psyche- the physical need of a middle-aged woman. In the same way, in *Cry the Peacock*, the novelist describes *Maya*'s unquenched desire for carnal pleasure.

..... longing to be with him, to be close to him..... make haste in undressing..... But when I went to rouse him from the couch with a touch. I saw that he had closed his eyes not with mere tiredness, but in profound, invulnerable sleep and was very far from any world of mine, however enticing. [14]

(*Cry the Peacock*, p93)

*Clear Light of Day*, Desai's masterpiece of familial attachments, and avowedly her most autobiographical novel, evokes this transition through an anglicised family in Old Delhi in the 40s. While *Raja* has fallen in love with a Muslim woman and left for Pakistan, and *Tara* has gone to the west as a diplomat's wife, the English lecturer *Bim* remains with her child-like brother *Baba* in a riot-haunted Delhi amid Chekhovian atrophy and decay. The immobility and frustration of the central female character in *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *Bim Das*, an apparently independent woman who is hostage of her past memories, are conveyed by zooming in on several details of the house where she lives, signifying decay and dullness.

## V. CONCLUSION

In Anita Desai novels, we have portrayal of different facets of feminine psyche which covers women of all age's groups, but they are nothing but gripping and enticing stories of women sufferings in the male dominated society. In *Raka*, we have a child with disturbing past and In *Maya*, a married woman who is hypersensitive, then we have *Sita*, who hates sex and sexual intercourse for her it is animal like thing so gross. In *Lotte*, a middle-aged woman searching for her identity as being a kept in the cacophony of the city life. Anita Desai has explored the psyche of both the childless women as of *Maya* in *Cry the Peacock*, *Sita* in *Where shall we go this summer* and *Nanda Kaul* in *Fire on the Mountain*. Thus, we can see that through these fascinating characterisations, she has done enough in exploring various facets of feminine psyche.

Yet for many, Desai's finest and toughest fiction remains that set in India, a subject she still finds -utterly overwhelming, and from which she withdraws, the better to shape it. she says:

I'm aware that I try to impose order on the chaos, especially of Indian life.....

.....One does retreat from the noise and clamour into solitude. But India is always on the verge of toppling into violence, which gives it an immense tension. Just as if I wrote about powerful women who were in control it wouldn't be truthful, if I wrote about a calm and benevolent place, I wouldn't be telling the truth. [15]

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