



ANITA DESAI'S FICTION: A WHISPER OF INNER SELF

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ABSTRACT

A literary celebrity of lasting significance Anita Desai believes firmly in the impeccable dignity and in the inviolable sanctity of the self. The question of the self dominates her fiction. An explorer par excellence of human experience, Desai portrays the monotony of unfulfilled dreams of the individual, the probable impossibility of knowing one's own self and the paradoxical nature of human existence. Desai deals with the enigmatic and chaotic fabric of Indian woman's life. According to Desai, a woman's self is always at war. She is always battling against the powerful image created for the benefit of man. The limitations that are imposed by socio-political and familial systems create a confrontation between the authentic self of woman which is longing for self-expression and the imposed self—an outcome of socialization, tradition and patriarchal structures. Desai very authentically conveys the inner-most feelings, thoughts and emotions of the self, especially the feminine psyche. There is a quest for reality and essential human experience in her novels. Desai's literary journey is the journey of a woman bearing various names from being to becoming as traced by the writer.

Key Words: Self, Woman, psychological, Patriarchal, Feminine, Psyche.

Anita Desai widely acclaimed as one of the foremost Indian novelists and a literary celebrity of lasting significance worldwide has tried to interrogate the tortured female self in her novels. She has tried to analyze the self-image of woman that is probably sealed and fixed by the socio-cultural imperatives. In her own way, she mostly treads over alienation with special reference to feminine psyche in her novels. The interior landscape peopled by women characters is set against the background of man's domination of social and domestic life with accumulated authoritarianism as its foundation. According to P.F. Patil, "... in Anita Desai's novels the inner workings, the inner sensibilities are more compelling than the outer weather or the visible action"(Patil 47). Thus, the question of the self dominates her fiction. Desai believes firmly in the impeccable dignity and in the inviolable sanctity of the self. In her novels she

highlights the fact that "... without this sense of dignity and sanctity of the self, existential awakening of the self remains vulnerable and the inner space can once again become contaminated"(Dalmia 13). An explorer par excellence of human experience, Desai portrays the monotony of unfulfilled dreams of the individual, the probable impossibility of knowing one's own self and the paradoxical nature of human existence.

Desai deals with the enigmatic and chaotic fabric of Indian woman's life. She highlights the subtle texture of fleeting impulses, disappointments, frustrations, aims, transient feelings and distorted visions of life of Indian women, all resulting in the fragmentation of her personality. In an interview she tells Florence Libert that her interest "... is the individual, a certain psychology of the individual"(Libert 51). She further adds that "...it isn't only an individual psychology that I am pursuing

when I write. I am interested in language, in prose style, in aligning words to experiences, with images"(Libert 52). While depicting the psyche of Indian woman, Desai uses powerful images which emblemize oppression, exploitation and fragmentation of the self. These contribute to the self-forfeiting feelings which damage the self-image. Desai is very successful in squaring up these self-forfeiting feelings which sabotage the self-image. Desai is remarkable for her psychological approach to the lived experience of innumerable characters who partake of every day human reality. Shantha Krishnaswamy evaluates her art thus: "Her interest in the consciousness of the women in her novels enables us to see the Indian women adequately from inside"(Krishnaswami 243). Anita Desai writes on the lines of Virginia Woolf who believed in the Joycean method of probing the depths of human mind. Desai unravels the oppressive forces of the female psyche which cause disillusionment.

In her first novel *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya the protagonist is constantly seized by fear of death, loneliness and alienation from her husband Gautama who always preached detachment. To Maya ". . . he looked more or less like a meditator beneath the bo-tree, seated upon a soft tiger skin, too fastidious to touch the common earth"(Cry the Peacock 113). Gautama fails to understand the trauma of self that is at war. Maya cannot comprehend the philosophical attitude of Gautama. Maya longs for a realistic approach and feels that Gautama will never understand her agony. She finally bursts out vehemently: "You know nothing of me - and of how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me"(Cry the Peacock 112). Gautama remains unperturbed when Maya calls him a betrayer. Four years of marriage make Maya neurotic. Her gradual degradation which results in neurosis is very effectively traced by Desai. By illustrating many typical incidents, Maya's neurosis is made self-evident from the beginning. The sight of the caged monkeys at the railway station invokes a violent reaction. She starts crying and Gautama feels ashamed of her. She identifies her trapped situation thus: "There I was amongst them, not one of those who sat quietly, in infinity of sadness and resignation, but one of those who clung, clung to the

bars till they cut into my flesh, and rattled them, shook them, crying over and over again"(Cry 156). We feel that ". . . the unusual juxtapositions and arresting metaphors constantly assault the senses of readers, almost demanding that they feel the way Maya herself feels"(srivastva 151). Maya feels trapped by her marriage to Gautama whose thoughts or actions cannot supply an antidote to her anxieties and anguish. For Gautama ". . . she is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute - she is the other"(Beauvoir 16). Desai feels that this forms the kernel of the outlook of majority of Indians towards their women. The main defect of this outlook according to Desai is the refusal to regard woman as a being capable of her own desires and interests. This contributes to a passionate and partisan outlook which criticizes unfairly the sentience - mind and will - of a woman. Maya is definitely a victim of such partisan outlook. Gautama's behavior activates her self-defeatist feelings and she becomes neurotic. "Maya's neurosis which tries to shatter the very identity of woman in our contemporary society is dominated by man, in whom a woman longing for love is driven mad or compelled to commit suicide"(Prasad 3).

Like Maya, Monisha in Desai's *Voices in the City* is also a victim of a loveless marriage. Monisha is also deprived of her husband's understanding and emotional support. Like Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock*, Jiban in *Voices in the City* can see Monisha only as a traditional wife. Both of them cannot comprehend the fact that these women have a mind of their own, feelings of their own, and that they need an important place and an effective voice in the existing framework of marriage. Monisha feels that not only her marriage but also her existence has become "... traceless, meaningless, and uninvolved"(Voices in the city 139). We feel that Desai has successfully dealt with the frustrations of Indian women arising out of a loveless marriage, and indifference shown by the patriarchal family. P.F. Patil asserts that Anita Desai "fearlessly puts forward the fact that in society marriages generally follow the jungle law of the survival of the fittest"(patil 129). The trauma of Monisha is expressed giving importance to suggestiveness and

indeterminacy. "Yet, did I not once possess it - this essential instinct of theirs? Why am I so sad? Why am I so afraid? Do I recall a time - an epoch ago - when I understood as well as they?"(Voices 239).

Another victim of this particular system is Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* But in Sita we can see the new self-concept of women slowly emerging. Bim in *Clear Light of Day* and Amla in *Voices in the City* have this new self-concept which inspires them to go against the existing system. "Bim attains self-identity not in self-insulation but in self-actualization brought out by the metaphor of awakening. All dualities vanish and Bim attains self-fulfillment and the wholeness of 'being'"(Nayak and Swain 34). This is applicable to Amla who "passes through variegated psyche situations till she establishes a contact with her real self and attains equipoise"(Nayak and Swain 34).Desai's significance lies in the fact that she portrays vividly and with incomparable subtlety, the intellectual sobriety and sensibility of her protagonists. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* decides to go to Manori, a lonely island, when she realizes the fact that her self-worth is trampled upon by the selfishness of her husband and children. When her husband calls her a deserter she emphatically retorts that she is not a coward to commit desertion. Her self-assertiveness takes a new dimension when she says to her husband "... there must be someone who says, 'No', Raman"(Where shall we go this Summer 148).

Desai also very emphatically points to the fact that women make many unpleasant compromises, for the sake of family. Desai challenges these compromises women have to make for the sake of the powerful patriarchal system. The limitations that are imposed by socio-political and familial systems create a confrontation between the authentic self of woman which is longing for self-expression and the imposed self –an outcome of socialization, tradition and patriarchal structures. Simone de Beauvoir puts down this clearly, "... the drama of woman lies in these conflicts between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) who always regards the self as essential and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the essential"(Beauvoir 27).Desai's fictional canvas conveys powerfully the fact that a woman is

assessed, evaluated in terms of her merging with institutionalized patterns of sexuality and norms of appropriate feminine behavior. When she deviates from this institutionalized behavior patterns there is the danger of being labeled as weird and perverse. According to Desai, a woman's self is always at war. She is always battling against the powerful image created for the benefit of men. This idealized self batters woman and drains her energy. Instead of fighting against these "stacked rules and systems", we can use it to create another self-image. It will be a rational and active process which will liberate and empower women. A new self-image suited to their needs will be egalitarian in concept and productive in action. A proper concept of the self will definitely empower women to fight against discrimination and will definitely prevent them from falling into traps set by patriarchal forces.

Desai very authentically conveys the innermost feelings, thoughts and emotions of the self, especially the feminine psyche. There is a quest for reality and essential human experience in her novels. She depicts the unpredictable nature of life, the conflicting dilemmas and sufferings that are inevitable in a woman's life. She portrays the struggle of the female psyche for identity. Her uniqueness lies in the fact that these experiences are processed and combined with her intuitive knowledge. It is her intuition that becomes the life force of her novels. Anita Desai has said "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. Writing is not an act of deliberation, reason or choice. It is a matter of instinct, silence, compulsion and waiting" (Desai 5).Probably the first Indian woman novelist to experiment in psychological novels Desai explores the psyche of her characters, the intimate world of the self. The psychological conflicts are more prominent than the sociological conflicts. But she integrates both judiciously in her novels. "It is in the very intermingling of the imaginative and realistic worlds, in the intellectual and emotional concerns and tensions, the innumerable sensuous images bathed in colors, scents, perfumes that the novel proves to be an intense experience" (Parikh 131)

The intense conflicts of individuals - the inter-personal conflicts as well as intra-personal conflicts are presented graphically. Sometimes conflict results in withdrawal, alienation, repression, neurosis and aggression and that too is more intense in the case of women. In all her novels, we come across conflicts- conflicts with the locale, conflicts in man-woman relationships, conflicts within oneself, conflicts which are externalized. Desai's artistic relevance lies in the fact that she has traced the root of these conflicts. The conflicts experienced by Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* have a neurotic quality. Maya's turbulent emotions are described thus: "what was true? What was lasting? What to believe in? What reject? Danger, Dangers ... the warning came whispering over a vast distance to me, struggling through the mass of truths and lies in nightmarish disguise. 'I have to go', I cried rising to my feet, and then and then more urgently, 'Gautama, I must go'" (*Cry* 86). The style evolves a definitive turn for precision and clarity. Saraha's thoughts are described thus by Desai: "If only she cried out once before the tangle of figures succeeded in drawing her thoughts wholly to them, if only she were allowed to keep her, one role apart from the other, one play from the other, she would not feel so cut and slashed into living, bleeding pieces. Apart-Apart that enviable cool, clear, light, quiet state of apartness" (*Bye Bye Blackbird* 37)

Anita Desai has very powerfully depicted the conflicts experienced by Indian women in general. She has depicted "the conflicts galore" experienced by women as they remain deprived politically and socially, and also within the patriarchal family. Indian woman is forced to project an inauthentic self-image, given to her by the patriarchal structure. So when a crisis occurs, the image is shattered and she experiences an utter sense of hopelessness and misery. So what she needs, according to Desai, is a new self-image which will enable her to achieve success. Revolutionary changes are sweeping all over the country and they have created a new awareness among women. It is this new awareness that makes the conflicts more intense. Women who never questioned the existing belief systems and traditions have started questioning the validity of these norms. Desai's female protagonists represent

the new women of India with a focused consciousness. They rebel against the existing power structures, internally as well as externally. Desai explores the feminine psyche very deeply to dig out the reasons for women's oppressions. She herself has declared "writing to me is process of discovering the truth - the truth that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality. Writing in my way is plunging to depths and exploring this underlying truth" (Vinson 348). It is real life that we see in Desai, with all its violence, squalor, existential agony, frustrations, hope, hopelessness and simple pleasures.

Anita Desai, the writer has received and is still receiving an overwhelming critical response not only in India, but also in the West. Most of the critical works point to one main aspect, and that is, the fact that she has depicted the frustrations of the female psyche. She has explored the root causes of these frustrations within the socio-cultural framework. It can be safely acclaimed that there is a new self-concept of Indian woman emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. Analysis of the critical data on Desai highlights the fact that they all pinpoint the female subjectivity that is self evident in her novels. Most of them conclusively point a finger at the patriarchal system in India which marginalizes women. With an in-depth approach combining feminism, history, sociology, psychology and using the tools of pure psychiatry to explore the development of the self, especially the Indian woman's self Anita Desai's fictional canvas holds a mirror up to real life situations. She is a writer with a vision and expresses truthfully her views of life in general. She presents the harassed, circumscribed world of the Indian woman in most of her novels. Desai the writer is more concerned about the individual than the environment. Peter Alcock says that in Desai's fiction "..... no self-consciousness obtrudes; rather we have the expression of, surely, a unique Indian sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the west" (Alcock 33). Spontaneity of expression encircles her story line and she interprets a highly complex, ever changing ensemble of social relations in which women are confined. The shattered image of the fractured self

of Indian woman is depicted very powerfully, without any self-consciousness.

The delineation of conflicts has elicited much critical acclaim. P.M. Nayak and S. P. Swain say that "the individual self struggles for the attainment of an authentic existence and hence it moves from a mistaken and confused awareness of identity to quiet self-assertion of individuality"(Nayak Swain 34). According to Desai conflicts are a part of life and they exist in man-woman relationship. In the Indian context the conflicts become more due to compartmentalization of man and woman. Stereotyping in society also contributes to the oppression of women. These conflicts have many negative results. Many women suffer from identity crisis. Most of the female protagonists are driven to the point of suicide. Others become neurotic. Sudhakar Ratnakar Jamkhani emphasizes the fact saying, "Desai is able to illustrate that (i) the sensibility of the Indian housewife, a victim of society's malicious traditions, is significant and that (ii) the effect of self-centeredness or self-pity is detrimental in husband and wife relationships" (Jamkhani 41). Women empowered with education, new orientations and economic independence refuse to accept meekly the traditional constraints of patriarchy. This is a major concern of the novelist. How these Indian women with a new awareness, with a focused consciousness decide to go in the opposite direction is very often the main thematic concern in Anita Desai. Meena Belliappii remarks that Desai's novels mark a new beginning in the female literary framework in India. According to her, "...the focus of interest has shifted from girlish romance to a more complex search for value in human relationship" (Belliappii 27). It is a mature world that is delineated by Desai, a world that rejects, accommodates, oppresses and propels the individual. The predicament of the individuals, caught in the whirlpool of socio-cultural changes, their struggle to survive, their alienation and existential agony are portrayed by Desai. Thus in her novels she looks at the problem of rootlessness, in its different forms, candidly and closely. Desai is also much acclaimed for her feminist perspectives. Her concern for Indian women surfaces very clearly in most of her novels. The patriarchal power structure

has held Indian woman in chains. The inequalities that exist between the sexes, along with socio-cultural belief systems, oppress women. Marital disharmony owing to lack of sensitivity, suicide and neglected children is very much a part of Desai's fictional canvas. According to Ruth K. Rosenwasser "Desai's women are heroines who voice their dissent through their recognition of and resistance to male dominance: in their relationship with their husbands (Maya and Sita) within their joint family (Monisha), with friends (Sita), with larger society (Ila and Bimla)" (Rosenwasser 83).

Desai's literary journey is the journey of a woman bearing various names from being to becoming as traced by the writer. The perceptible reality of women in general is depicted and discussed psychologically-- woman as mother, sister, daughter, grandmother, friend and as a conscious 'being-in-itself' and 'being-for-itself'. A.V. Krishna Rao says that Desai is a novelist "who does not fight shy to probe into the sub-conscious layers of experience of sensitive young men and women in an urban milieu" (RAO 74). While exploring the text on the lines of psycho-analysis, social psychology and other literary trends Anita Desai retains a high level of subjectivity. What strikes her is the landscape of the psyche. Her commitment to intuition, subjective states of mind, pure imagination and such faculties make her works to go deep into the psychology of interpersonal relationships. Sociological ideas with a bearing upon man-woman equation, gender subjectivity and sex-role stereotyping are explored with a psychological point of view. Anita Desai has fabricated and exhibited emotional resonance of feminine existence quite well with the help of her minute psychological observation.

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