



PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE PSYCHE IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai, the foremost and arguably the best of the second generation Indian Women novelists in English, gave womanhood a touch of psychological realism. She brought about a sea- change in the portrayal of women characters and added a new dimension to the fiction of Indian women. Unlike her contemporaries like Kamala Markandeya and NayantaraSehgal, Desai is primarily concerned with the inner life of her heroines. What distinguishes her from most of the other Indo- English Novelists is her ability to portray the contemporary womenpsychological struggle for individuality and her search for identity. Desai does not resort to sensationalism in exploring the life of women in her novels. She portrays the alienated self of woman. In a large number of novels she has created a variety of women characters that are psychologically affected as a result of their utter helplessness in asserting themselves as human-beings deserving a measure of dignity. The dominant theme in most of her novels therefore is the struggle of woman against the experience of agony of existence in a hostile and male dominated society. Her woman characters are hypersensitive; they find themselves maladjusted and misunderstood most of the time.

The Indian women are not expected to worry about her own personal happiness and comforts. On the other hand she is encouraged to sacrifice her personal happiness for the well-being of the family. The woman who want to change and create a little space for them appear odd and selfish to others. Desai presents the strange predicament of especially these women who experience a sense of neglect, loneliness and desperation.

Maya, the central character of Anita Desai' Cry the Peacock, is obsessed almost from the beginning of the novel with the gloomy prophecy of an albino astrologer. According to the prophecy she or her husband would die during the fourth year of her marriage. Her father dismisses the prophecy as nonsense and orders that it should be forgotten. Obeying his wish Maya keeps the prophecy rigorously repressed in her unconscious until her marriage with Gautama enters the fourth year (superstition and psyche in Anita Desai's Cry the Peacock.p-13)

Cry, the Peacock, is a novel mainly concerned with the theme of disharmony between husband and wife relationship. Here Anita Desai has dealt with the sterile woman, highly sensitive and emotional, who is married to Gautama, a promising, prosperous and over busy practitioner of law. Gautama's sensibilities are too rough and practical to suit Maya's. She is pampered child of RaiSaheb and is brought up in a atmosphere of luxury. The

novels begin with the death of Maya's pet dog Toto. This event upsets Maya so terribly that she is off her mental balance. Being childless she is much attached to the dog and it seems that the dog was a child substitute:

'Childless woman do develop fanatic attachments to their pets, they say. It is no less a relationship than that of woman and her child, no less worthy of reverence, and agonized remembrance.'(CTP.p10)

But Gautama a practical man takes this event easy and makes arrangements for its burial consoles Maya in his own way and says that he would bring another dog for her. In order to console her he offers her a cup of tea without realizing Maya's shattered state of mind..this mechanical gesture only makes her to brood over Gautama insensitivity.

'Showing how little he knows of my misery, or how to comfort me. But then he knew that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge of gold....telling me to go to sleep while he work at his papers, he did not give another thought to me...it is his hardness-no, no not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talks of cup of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and talking reveal me. It is that my loneliness in this house(CP.p9)

This example certainly gives us an idea of Anita Desai's art of reading woman's psychic self, which reveals Maya's inner thoughts. Maya is an hypersensitive woman, an introvert. Many critics have pointed out this incompatibility. UshaPathania tracing the cause of disharmony between the characters remark:

Marital relationships are established with the explicit purpose of providing companionship to each other. However, the element of companionship is sadly missing in the relationship between Maya and Gautama."

To sum up, Maya's tragedy is mainly caused by her loneliness, lack of proper response from her husband, non-reciprocation of feeling between the husband and wife, her childlessness and her hypersensitivity.(A Critical Study Of The Novels Of Anita Desai-N.R.Gopal.p-19,20)

Anita Desai's second novel *Voices In The City*(1965) has received adequate critical response. The title of the novel has made critics to debate on the point whether Nirode or the city of Calcutta may be called the hero of the novel. Desai's skillful handling invests the city with a character. Nirode's sketch on the other hand is rather insipid. The whole novel is divided into four –Nirode, Monisha, Amla and Mother. It is a feudal family of Kalimpong dominated by the mother with an inferior father who is most of the time drunk. The story of the novel begins with the departure of Arun to England for higher studies and Nirode who works in a newspaper office as a simple clerk. His sister Monisha is married to Jiban, a middle rung officer in government department, with a large joint family. Monisha's ill-matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility, and the stress of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband push her to the breaking point and she commits suicide by self-immolation. The novel ends with the funeral of Monisha on arrival of her mother from Kalimpong.

In this novel also Anita Desai has portrayed feminine psyche mainly through the character of Monisha. Monisha is similar to Maya in that she is also childless, sensitive and a victim of ill-matched marriage.If Maya is lonely in her family because it is a nuclear family with no one except her husband.Monisha's family has too many people, since it is a joint family. Her sister-in-law always without any hesitation barge into her room making themselves comfortable on the big bed discussing Monisha's sarees and her blocked fallopian tube. Her plight increases because sterility is a stigma for a married woman. Through Monisha, Anita Desai has portrayed the psyche of a sensitive intellectual woman,

who is suffocated in uncongenial atmosphere of in-laws house. Because of her intellectual nature she is not much interested in religion even though she reads the Bhagvad Gita. She writes 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.’ Ah yes, yes then it is a choice between death and mean existence, and that surely, is not a difficult choice.(VC)

She is in contrast with the average Bengali daughter in-law as described graphically in the same section, sacrificing her life for the husband and the family confined within the four walls of the house. The life of the woman like Monisha in the given circumstances is never happy and the result is that she burns herself to death. Her impending death by suicide has been poetically described by Anita Desai even before her actual death which comes later in the novel.

‘leave me, gather stars, frosty and distant and cool. Leave me to gather and then to reject them. Queenly I’ll have only the darkness. Only the dark spaces between the star, for they are the only thing on the earth that can comfort me, rub a balm into my wounds, into my throbbing head, and bring me this coolness, this stillness, this interval of peace. Even sleep has not this sweet, swaying stillness as these immensities of the night, sky to which I tip my face, allowing them to fall into my eyes, and fall. Sleep has nightmares. This, empty darkness, has not so much as a dream. It is one-untitled waste, a desert to which my heart truly belongs.(VC.p138)

The above extract has Shakespearean echo from Hamlet when Hamlet is pondering over suicide in the famous ‘to be or not to be’ soliloquy.

Motherhood is the ultimate objective of the woman and that is why the importance of and craving for children, if male, all the better is feelingly is described by the novelist. Anita Desai has explored the psyche of both the childless woman, as of Maya in *Cry the Peacock* of 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 also the psyche of, ‘unwomanly’ women in the sense that they don’t want children. Certainly they are not as ‘unsexed’ as Lady Macbeth was.

Sita in *Where shall we go this summer?* Shudders at the idea of giving birth to a fifth child. She becomes so upset that she withdraws into her psyche of childhood days on the magic island. Against all sane advice she goes to the island in advanced stage of pregnancy. She lives in the world of fantasy thinking that going to the island and thereby to the world of childhood she could prevent the biological process of delivery. If Maya is starved of children, for her:

‘children... through her mind flowed a white, flapping succession in nappies, vests...that have to be gathered together. She could see the expressionless faces of the night nurses in the ward...in the greenish night light, regarding her as she came in, ravaged by the first pains..she could see the impassive face of nurses who would stay by her in the theatre, now and then glancing at her large, flat watch, bored by yet another woman’s panic stricken labour.(WSWGTS.p153-154)

For her is the strange case of neuroticism where the woman doesn’t want to give birth to a child. However she consents to the sane advice of her husband and comes back to Bombay to deliver. Raman’s family members are quite accommodative and considerate towards Sita but she is always grudging. Raman’s is a traditional Hindu family where even men do not smoke openly but Sita just to spite her in-laws smokes openly. Things become so bad that Raman shifts to a flat to avoid daily tensions. But even Sita here is not happy. She is

irrational, childish and petulant. She becomes upset even after reading the newspaper which is full of the news of brutality and violence and destruction all over the world.

‘..her husband casually handed over the newspaper on his way out to office. They all hammered her with cruel fists- the fallen blocks, the torn watercolors, the headlines about the war in Vietnam, the photograph of a woman weeping over a small grave, another of a crowd outside a Rhodesian jail; articles about the perfidy of Pakistan..they were hand grenades all hurled at her frail gold fish bowl belly and instinctively she laid her hands over it, feeling the child there play like some soft fleshed fish in a bowl of warm sea-water..frightened certain now that civilization had been created by the god-like efforts of the few, in the face of constant, timeless war of destruction that had begun with time and was now roaring around her, battering her and her fish fetus so that survival seemed hopeless. How civilization could survive, how could the child? How could she hold them whole and pure and unimpeached in the midst of this bloodshed? They would surely be wounded, fall and die.’

Being sensitive to violence and brutality in the world is one thing but to be affected by it so much as not to lead a normal life is a different thing bordering on mental disease. Through the character of Sita in *Where shall we go this summer?* And Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, Anita Desai has portrayed the feminine psyche of neurotic women. The cause of their mental misbalance is different. However, both of them are not normal. They might be called sub-normal, if not abnormal. What is remarkable about psychological probing of the woman is that she includes females of different age groups. She has also perceptively explored the psyche of a girl in *Fire on the mountain*.

Raka is the girl who occupies our attention in *Fire on the mountain*. It is difficult to say whether the novels centers around Nanda Kaul or Raka. Raka is an unusual child and her name does not correspond with any of her physical characteristics;

‘Raka- what an utter misnomer thought Nanda Kaul..Raka meant the moon, but this child was not round faced, calm or radiant..NandaKaul thought she looked like one of those dark crickets that lead up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin precarious legs.’(FOM.p.39)

If Nanda Kaul defends her privacy fiercely Raka too is absolutely independent, satisfied with her own self and never bothering her Nani. She is the most unchildlike child. Her unchildlike quality and introvert nature is the result of her traumatic childhood. Once she spies on the drunken Orgy in the club, her mind is flooded with the unpleasant memory of her childhood days, of her drunken father coming home late at night and beating her mother and she hiding somewhere in the room.

‘...her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammer and fists of abuse-harsh filthy abuse that made Raka cover under her bed clothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her feet, in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother’s being squelching and quivering, so that she didn’t know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. Ahead of her, no longer on the ground but at some distance now, her mother was crying. Then it was a jackal crying.’(FOM,p.71-72)

It is this traumatic childhood experience that has such a dehumanizing effect on Raka’s mind that she becomes pathetic to finding any interest in childish games. Her refusal to play with toys which is so natural with the children very well describes her psyche.

Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the mountain*, has raised a big family with full responsibility but in the evening of her life she loves seclusion and the news of her grand-daughter Raka’s arrival shatters her isolated world. Raka who is a precarious child from a broken home

presents another facets of feminine psyche. She is more interested in rambling through the hills and jungles. Her disturbed mental state culminates in her act of pyromania when at the end of the novel she puts the forest on fire. Hence the title of the novel.(A Critical Study Of The Novels Of Anita Desai.N.R.Gopal.p19-20,23-30)

Some critics have gone deep into psychology of some of these writers and their heroines. The educated independent woman who brush aside the male dominated world as silly and meaningless, have gone ahead as insurgent and have raised a literature of protest. She has cited the examples of George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters. Anita Desai joins this illustrious company of female authors who have created memorable characters who continuously fight for their rights, and assert their individuality. They are often faced with a choice between conviction and conformity. They always choose the former though have to face the violent tides of the society against them. How many women in India set up are ready to carry on a gossip and discussion on blocked fallopian tubes openly in such an age of science and technology. But as ShantaKrishnaswamy points out in Anita Desai, 'being a woman is problem. All the rules and restrictions against which little girl chafed and women grumbled about were designed only to block all routes to escape from the conventional mode of living from society that beastly tamer..."

According to N.R.Gopal, 'In different novels Anita Desai has portrayed different facets of feminine psyche.' Thus she has succeeded in their lives is another point altogether. A wasteland is not important to man, but if such presentations of characters can help in the better understanding and corrections of some aberrations in the society. It will serve some purpose. Anita Desai's characters are not important in themselves. But if man understand the suppression and oppression of women in the society, it will serve to correct certain attitudes. On such a term it is important.

Anita Desai considers the outside world and action only as a tip of the ice-berg, the bulk of which remains sub-merged of it. Cry, the Peacock, is considered to be the first psycho analytical fiction in Indo-Anglian literature. Anita Desai, has succeeded in bringing out the mental fulmination and unhindered thought processes of its heroine Maya who is revealed as a hypersensitive and neurotic female character, who causes a lot of harm not only to herself but also to a host of others including her husband.(The Novels Of Anita Desai:A Critical Study-Manmohan Krishna Bhatnagar.p.183,184)

Conclusion:

Desai's first three novels are a study of women's depression resulting from their inability to grapple with their family situations. Some of her novels deals with the issues related to women's issues related to woman's education and their aspiration to obtain self-sufficiency and a meaningful existence. She writes about woman in the urban middle class who have had the privilege of receiving education. Cry, the Peacock and Voices in the city depict woman characters that revolt against social relationship and are force to make a choice between life and death. Desai's women characters live a dual life, the inner and the outer..she delves deep into the inner psychic lives of her characters. Desai's presents Monisha's mother(VC)as a rebel of different kind, who refuses to become a conformist. She takes an unorthodox step to get rid of the death trap. She abandons her husband for an army officer. Her move is condemned as a manipulative act of sexuality. Society expected her to remain faithful even though the husband was a depraved man. She was even equated with kali, the goddess, the destroyer and preserver.

Cry, the Peacock is replete with the imagery of fear and loneliness describing a feminine psyche on the verge of madness, speaks of father daughter relationship. What continuously bewilders the readers is the absence of any recollections of mother in Maya's mind. The daughter obsession with her father is again traced in 'Where shall we go this summer? Sita's journey to the island of Manori is a psychic journey back to her childhood. Once

again the mother is absent, while in *Voices in the city*, Desai explores the mother son relationship. Desai takes the social context to analyse the gender behavior in family and community. She finds solutions in compromise within family bondage but at the same time. She makes it clear that compromise never total submission and surrender. Most of Desai's woman characters registered protest against the circumstances which oppressed them. Yet where Maya, Monisha, Nanda failed to tide over the crisis, Sita succeeded in doing so. Desai's entire fiction traces the changing image of woman in the face of existential dilemmas. These female protagonists assert their rights to exist not as shadows of their male counterparts but as independent human beings with a will of their own. It shows although Desai is not surrealist yet her understanding of the female psyche is highly distinctive and remarkable. She views the female in relation to different kinds of organization- familial, social, national and international.

One of the primary concerns of Feminism is to declare that a woman is a being. She is not appendage a subordinate of man. Rather she is an autonomous being, capable of trivial and error and finding her own way to salvation. We come across such woman figures in the novels by Anita Desai, who is consciously trying to come to terms with themselves as individuals. Their voice is now gradually becoming audible. And there is definitely a protest in their own voice. The modern woman protests and dares to pronounce her convictions. Anita Desai as a focused feminist has presented three kinds of females. Who are hypersensitive and after self-introspection they plunge further into dark dismal depths of neurosis, like Maya. The second group portrays woman characters that silently suffers the strain of life and become idealists or commit suicide like Monisha or Nanda Kaul. While the third discloses woman who discern new and important discoveries about themselves resulting in a sobering effect on them and they find a sense of fulfillment, in their relation to the world. Even in a male dominated society such woman characters try to establish the own value system and if they fail, then their inner potentiality enables them to resist unjust social pressure and they protest.

Anita Desai's woman displays a sensitive and subtle awareness of the forces systems. She has staunchly refused to be labeled as feminist but there is an incipient feminist consciousness present in the simmering anger of Maya or Sita and the studied difference of Monisha or Nanda. Considered as a whole, her novels reveal a progression in the psychic awareness of woman about their position in the society. Her characters do not succumb to patriarchal tortures, rather they have the capacity to analyse the nature of the pain to come to decision about their lives. Desai herself says:

'Few Indian Feminists really contemplate total change. Working towards an adjustment through the traditional role is much less drastic, much more Indian. I think Indian Feminism is more practical than theoretical. It is expedient rather than ideological.' (Anita Desai and Her Fictional World-Neeru Tandon.p.110-114)

Desai's greatness as a writer revolves around her achievements in exploring the psyche of her characters. The probing of the novelist always brings up innumerable conflicts, mostly psychological. According to B.Panigrahi:

The novels of Anita Desai depict extreme situations arising out of the conflicts in the inner configurations of the individuals- the conflict between reason and instinct, the will and reality, involvement and detachment. These conflicts revolve round the interplay of the 'self with others'.

Desai's critics unanimously agree on one point, and that is, she has successfully portrayed the Indian woman's world. There is definitely an inward turning to convey what a woman is, what she says, sees, and does. It is the intimate world of the female self that is revealed in the majority of novels. In her novels the locale becomes an extension of the self. They are also inextricably bound. In *Cry, the Peacock* through Maya, the locale of the novel is

projected. The locale of old Delhi with its pedestrians, bicycles, Red fort area,...Jama Masjid rising like Muezzin's call to prayer into a sky of heavy gray tinged pearl and people lying asleep in the shade of trees on the ghost swept maiden...'becomes alive in her fictional canvas. Maya's tortured self, the psychic energy that emits from her merges with the intense summer of Delhi. She longs for her summer home in the hills of Darjeeling. We also sees the outside world through Maya's consciousness pass one by one, just as the outside world changes, overlapping and tense moments vibrate to culminate in something tragic and terrible.(CP.159,129)

In *Fire on the mountain*, Carignano symbolizes Nanda's isolated self. Like her, Carignano also raises barriers and defences through its barrenness and emptiness. It is a secluded place among the rocks and pines of Kasuli. She has spent a great deal of energy, rebelling against herself, her husband and children. So she feels very comfortable in Carignano. It was the place and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life- as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great cool flowering of relief- and at last she had it. Nanda Kaul was a withered, tall, gray and thin woman. Her image is projected by this locale.' pine trees with charred tree trunks and contorted branches, striking melodramatic attitudes on stage. Rocks arrested in mid-roll, rearing up, dropping.(fom.p-182,183). Raka's withdrawal is not fabricated. She is at peace with herself in Carignano, unlike her grandmother. The child's loneliness and deprivation makes her fugitive in the company of nature. The sense of pitifulness, aching restlessness and exasperation of the child is telescoped into the locale. Raka feels that- there was something about it- illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless- that made her tingle. The scene of devastation and failure somehow drew her, inspired her.

In *Where shall we go this summer?* Sita escapes to the island Manori. Manori, the island looks dark against the sky. It is like her, self that is disillusioned by her meaningless existence. She like Nanda Kaul longs for isolation. Sita's deprivation, long periods of boredom force her to seek refuge in this island which belonged to her father. She was running away from the 'black drama in this crowd-theatre, murder, infanticide, incest, theft, and robbery, all were much practiced by these rough raucous rasping tattered demalions..the island becomes symbolic of her psyche, and reflects her irrational fears, her unuttered frustrations, and becomes the predominant motif of Sita's life.' The island had been buried beneath her consciousness deliberately, for years. Its black magic, its subtle glamour had grown too huge, had engulfed her at a time when she was still very young and quite alone'. After experiencing many conflicts she realizes her true self, which frees her from emotional bondages. When a person aware of his or her self, a reorganization is inevitable. And this is what exactly that makes Sita appraise her world in a positive manner (WEWGTS.p41,90-91,38,57,131)

In *Voices in the city*, Calcutta is the city of darkness, death and destruction. The city epitomizes the existential agony of Nirode, Amla and Monisha .Amla realizes that the city had changed Monisha her sister. Something Amla saw had laid its hand upon her, scarred her and altered her till she bore only the faintest resemblance to the quiet and subtly uncaring sister Amla had remembered.' Monisha warns her sister that she should not allow her to oppress her. Monisha tries to reach for her identity but feels that she has 'no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing. I can give myself to, and so I must stay..Ah yes, yes then it is a choice between death and mean existence and that surely is not a difficult choice. 'I' and her choice is the tragic end. Amla, a young career minded girl, an extrovert unlike her brother and sister, also feels dejected in Calcutta the city oppresses her and she exclaims to Nirode that'this city, this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn't it?. The three of them ask the fundamental questions about human existence and are confused about human nature. Monisha and

Nirodespeaks about the inevitability of death and nothingness, and are victims of self-destructive ages. Amla on the contrary focuses on the positive features of anxiety, anxiety as the road to self-affirmation. Desai's Calcutta becomes a part of existential design of the characters in the novel the disintegration of values in society force individuals to be inauthentic non actualizers. (VC.p142,121-122,158,132)

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