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The Portrayal of the Female Characters in the Novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract

For centuries, women have inspired literature and played an important role in its creation. Even though many Indian women writers have made outstanding contributions to English literature, the fight for social justice and women's rights still persists. Anita Desai is an eminent contemporary Indian English woman writer of fiction. She has written on a variety of themes but a majority of them are based on women's sufferings. Anita Desai has a unique inner approach to women's psyche which she explores with careful sensitivity that shows her deep understanding of women's problems in India. In their fictional and autobiographical writings, Indian English writers address a variety of sociocultural issues. Their works significantly focus on the human condition and its existential struggles. The post-colonial era's emergence of the feminist movement delved into the miserable situation of Indian women and demanded equal rights for the gender, which has long been suppressed and marginalized. Desai is one such writer that expresses the viewpoint of women through her novels. Her books mostly focus on the inner lives and experiences of Indians, particularly Indian women.

Keywords: *Feminism, Alienation, Frustration, Patriarchal Society*

Introduction

Anita Desai's works are totally different from other Indian women writers in English: Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, who mainly concern themselves with politics, East-West encounter and social theme. Desai is concerned with the psychic life of her characters. Since her childhood, Desai was conscious of being a writer. Writing is a part of her character, temperament, nature and life. She has added to her genius by learning from other writers. When she was nine years old, she first read Wuthering Heights. Although she could not understand half of it yet it was a thrill. She remembers her experience:

"It struck me with force of a gale and I still vibrate to it. Ever since; literature has seemed to me more interesting, more significant and overwhelming than the real world. Later, of course, other writers meant more to me. In my twenties when I first began to work seriously and consciously on my novels, it was D.H. Lawrence, Virgina Woolf, Henry James and Proust that influenced me more strongly."

Anita Desai created and popularised a new subgenre of psychological fiction about Indian women. She became well-known for delving into the minds of her female characters while placing them in odd situations with themes that are specific to feminine sensibility. Anita Desai does not identify as a feminist, yet her works construct imaginary worlds that penetrate the feminine psyche without adhering to labels. Women are shown as repressed and constrained by the pa-

triarchal norms of the conventional family and society. The novels frequently depict the limitations on women's freedom caused by their dependence on the family patriarchs. The female protagonists frequently express life dissatisfaction and a desire for fulfillment and self-existence. Desai's concern is with the psychic life of her characters. For this "She has been considered as a novelist of mood and psyche" (Sharma 166).

Kohli points out "No other writer is so much concerned with the life of young man and woman in Indian cities as Anita Desai."

In Indian society, it is widely held that men are superior and hold positions of authority and cultural superiority. In addition to religious practices and cultural institutions, women are side lined on a socio-domestic level as well. The proposed study makes an attempt to focus on various representations of women in Indian English literature with particular attention to Anita Desai's novels Cry the Peacock, and Voices in the City and, Where Shall We Go This Summer? Women are the victims of social and domestic forces in these works.

'Cry, the Peacock,' by Anita Desai, was her debut publication (1963). She went on to write a number of works during the ensuing years, including "Bye-bye Blackbird," "Where Shall We Go This Summer?" ,"Fire on the Mountain, "Clear Light of Day," "In Custody," and "The Village by Sea." In addition to this, she has produced short stories that have earned her significant recognition. The majority of her plot lines are either a reflection of or influenced by her own life experiences. She longs for her freedom in them while she struggles with her characters' psychic issues. Her female protagonists tend to focus on their tense relationships.

She takes an independent stance on women's issues in Indian society and in life in general. In many of her works, Anita Desai explores the conflict between family members and the alienation of middle-class women. The predominant themes in Desai's novels include marital strife, estrangement, and troubled familial relationships. These themes are interconnected and flow together. An analysis of the themes of these novels is a useful critical exercise that will highlight a number of aspects of these books, with a particular focus on her views on marriage, estrangement, alienation, her worldview, women's issues, etc. Voices in the City tackles the issue of women's estrangement in a patriarchal culture, whereas Cry, the Peacock deal with the subject of marital strife.

The theme of Cry, the Peacock is marital strife. Due to the temperamental differences and opposition between the two, Maya and Gautama's marriage breaks down. Maya is vivacious and eager to live life to the fullest. She sees sexual fulfillment as a necessity, and her complete denial of it makes her a victim of neurosis and schizophrenia. She enjoys all the positive aspects of life, including poetry, dance, nature, and animals and birds. She becomes absorbed in the pleasure of lovely sights and sounds. She feels compassionate when she hears bird screams. She is portrayed in the book as a woman who yearns for life's joys.

Desai effectively employs symbols, monologues, and flashbacks in the novel to showcase the psyche of the protagonist, Maya. She fails to be a traditional wife. Their marriage never succeeds because her apathetic husband is unable to recognize her emotional side. The peacock's cries for union are echoed by her own desire for an emotional union. Maya is obsessed with her childhood prediction of catastrophe. Maya's obsession with the prediction and declining mental health worsen over time. Here comes the feeling of violence, the feeling that Maya will either kill or be killed. This novel perfectly illustrates the idea that women require more than just food, clothing, and shelter.

Through Maya's character, Desai establishes a new era of feminist writing. Maya stands apart from all the women characters in the novel. She is the most interesting and psychologically mystifying among all of Desai's female characters. She represents a class of women who silently suffer at the hands of men. Her actions and reactions may not always draw one's sympathy and can be dismissed as the useless thoughts of a luxurious mind. Her suffering is also luxurious suffering but

the demands of the social changes put forth by the novelist can't be ignored. The fashion of living away from the parental house, the mother living away from the children, and the increasingly busy life, are some of the fractions of changing patterns.

Another novel, The Voices of the City (1965), features three siblings, Nirodha, Amla, and Monisha. Amla and Monisha are shown as two opposites, with Nirodha still serving as the main character. Jiban, a moralist who is married to Monisha, requests more civility from her toward his family. Monisha's desire for privacy makes her nostalgic for her childhood, but it also drives her to isolate herself. Monisha is aware of the meaninglessness of her existence because she lives in servitude to Jiban and his joint family. When she is charged with stealing money to pay for her brother's medical bills, it finally breaks her. She sets herself on fire out of disappointment and heartbreak.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? is her fourth novel. Sita, the main character and a sensitive woman in her early forties, experiences a severe identity crisis. Her early years spent on Manori Island twenty years ago serve as a symbol for her. Her obsessive preoccupation with the past gives her the motivation to leave her home, husband, two children, and the urbanized life of Bombay for Manori island, where she believes she can live under a magical spell. The past becomes a psychic residue in her «personal unconsciousness,» the backdrop of her life, and her preoccupation.

Sita is a rebellious, nonconformist woman who struggles to free herself from patriarchal conventions. As a young woman, she is also troubled by the notion that women are confined to the «four walls» of the home and must exhibit the behaviors of the ideal «wife» and «mother.» She carves a position for herself in defiance and flees to the island of Manori, where she hopes to achieve the status of an «independent female.» She is adaptable in her husband›s home, but it does not mean she is financially challenged or mistreated. However, the feminist woman in her makes her disdain her position. Sita's problems seem to be due to the maladjustment with her husband; the home life and the atmosphere surrounding her nauseate her. She is fed up with her husband, a businessman whose complete lack of feelings brings her to the verge of insanity. A deep change takes in Sita a proud mother of four children:

Four children with pride, with pleasure-sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure- with all placid serenity that supposedly goes with pregnancy and parturition. Her husband was puzzled, therefore, the fifth time she told him she is pregnant, she did it with quite a paranoic show of rage, fear, and revolt. he stared at her with a distaste that told her it did not become her- a woman now in her forties, greying, aging to behave in such a total lack of control. Control was an accomplishment that had slipped out of her control. (WSWGTS 29)

Sick of everything, Sita becomes too oppressive to leave everyone. The world becomes unbearable to her and she flies to Manori. Her ultimate rejection of the male-dominated values gets outburst in her seeking exile to the island Manori. But the austerity and stark realities of life cannot be ignored. To sita, the escape to Manori is nothing but the realization of the critical truth about life that one has to face.

A woman, however strong may be is expected to negotiate in life by shattering all hopes and aspirations. realization brings her to sense that there is no escape for her, no world of illusion for her to retreat and life must go on. As her island of desire holds no promise and scope for her children Sita, reverts from self-alienation to self-realization. Though the women in Desai appear to be modern and liberated, but they are constantly traumatized by extreme conflicts and hazards in relationships. Ultimately, Sita recognizes her fate and choose an accepted life by returning to the fold of her husband and children. Betrayed and humiliated, Sita is forced to com her desire to bear the child and return with Raman to the land signifies her return to life, community and society in spite of the debased dullness of life…" (Anand 100)

No matter the sorrow of life that Sita encounters, she shows more practical maturity than Maya and Monisha, the early heroes of Desai. Sita surpasses them in her ability to have a better and more optimistic perspective on life. When Sita returns to her house with her husband and kids, the book comes to a happy conclusion. As a result, we can observe how family tension and strains influence Sita, the protagonist of Desai's story, who at first experiences a feeling of estrangement before coming to terms with reality.

As a feminist writer, Desai introduces the theme of women's freedom in all of these novels. Her young women characters yearn for freedom. But quite unfortunately none of her characters could free themselves from the bondage. Maya thinks, "I had not escaped. The years had caught up, and now the final, the decisive one held me in its perspiring clasp from which release seemed impossible" Monisha describes her plight: "Why am I so sad? Why am I so afraid? . . . They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret."

The patriarchal dominance torments Desai's female characters, who are constantly shown as being hypersensitive, alone, and powerless. The characters' reactions to the male-dominated culture vary from aggressive to sensitive. She writes about sensitive women in a world dominated by insensitive men. Her main issue is the existential dilemma in the current societal environment, where men rule and women are subjugated. Desai illustrates the condition of women who are treated like caged birds through the figure of Monisha. Men attack her female characters mercilessly. In Cry, the Peacock, Maya's integrity is crumbling under a variety of stresses, primarily because of her intellectually sensitive life partner. Despite having a European tradition, her novels are primarily Indian. Desai challenges common perceptions of Indian women, particularly those from the middle class. Most of her women are housewives, but they are unhappy one way or the other. Desai thrusts a voice and desire into the being of these women. Anita Desai uses her characters as her mouthpiece in her quest to discover the meaning of life. They are not only cardboard cut outs or placeholders. They represent more than just one civilization or one historical period. Anita Desai's primary goal in writing her novels is to examine and elaborate on the human mind and sense of self. The plight of the modern man does appear to be one of the novelist's primary interests in the current socio-political environment.

Conclusion

Finally, Anita Desai stands to be one of the most powerful contemporary Indian Novelists in English. She makes an effort to identify the inner motivations, emotions, and sentiments that underlie her characters' behavior and to demonstrate how these feelings have an impact on that behavior. Her depiction of the man-woman relationship is impacted and constrained by the complicated social environment. In her portrayal of the struggle of contemporary women in a culture that is still dominated by men, she primarily attempts to speak for herself. She essentially says that the temperamental differences between men and women affect their relationships. Most women are culturally and emotionally reliant on men, thus disruption in relationships results in a loss of identity. One assesses his or her value based on the relationships in their life. Her female characters go through a lot of internal anguish and work to get over it so they can become empowered in their lives.

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