

A PSYCHOLOGICAL NOVELIST: ANITA DESAI

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INTRODUCTION:

Anita Desai's higher education has given her a deep insight into the human psyche and a clear critical perspective to re-examine tradition. She has shed her inhibitions in a marvelous fashion in order to show surprising frankness, boldness and honesty in the fictional treatment of the workings of the human psyche. Her novels throw light on inner climate, the climate of sensibility. Her primary intention as a novelist is to depict the psyche and emotional states of her protagonists. Anita Desai has a great significance to achieve and handle the nuances of human inner psyche beautifully. In her novels we do not find political and philosophical or social idea of characters but only characters with their observations, motivations, their consciences and their tensions. Desai is blessed with good observations, sensitiveness and penetrating analysis of the characters, the qualities necessary for a psychological novelist. It becomes natural for her to make each work of hers a haunting discovery of the inner-self. As it is incumbent for an author who wants to point out the psychological aspects of characters to employ a certain design by which the interior working of the protagonist's mind is unfolded gradually with the progress of the narration, therefore Desai's endeavor is to discover the significance of reality by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, illuminating those depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the apparent world. Anita Desai is primarily a novelist of moods, of persistent states of mind or psyche. She is interested in the psychic life of her characters and her novels reveal that her real concern is with the exploration of human psyche. Her contribution to fiction writing has been quite commendable and substantial. She comes face to face with intangible realities of life, the innermost depths of the human psyche and the chaotic underworld of human mind through her novels. Her distinctive stature as a novelist derives primarily from the fact that she has made extensive use of the stream-of-consciousness technique in her novels. Her achievement lies in the fact that she employs a relatively new technique in Indian English fiction with a remarkable consummate skill. The fiction of Anita Desai has become self-analytical and introspective and the individual's quest for a personal meaning in life has become a theme of unavoidable interest for her. Her primary emphasis is thus on sights and sounds, on movements and patterns both physical and mental as they impinge on the consciousness of her protagonist. Her protagonists have usually sensitive sense of doom and withdraw into a sequestered world of their own. Anita Desai has presented in her novels the predicament of sensitive women characters, who find it very difficult to adjust in the present mechanical and urbanized set-up. She sincerely broods over the fate and future of modern woman. She has explored different aspects of feminine psyche like man-woman dichotomy, their very personal relations, presentation of neurotic characters, etc. In fact, most of her novels are a study of feminine psyche, which comprises women of all ages. Images and symbols are employed freely to reveal the inner psyche of the characters and illuminated their obsession changing and contrasting moods, and psychic deviation besides emphasizing the obscure and weird atmosphere of her tale. Desai portrays her female characters on the verge of psychological breakdown with a view to capture the prismatic quality of life in her fiction. She uses the stream of consciousness technique, flashbacks and interior monologues. Her female characters are educated, well to do and hypersensitive ladies burdened by chaotic milieu. Desai reflects the inner struggle of such characters, their desire to break the shackles and come out of their shells and assert themselves as human beings. Desai can be considered as the innovator of psychological study of alienated women in India. She deals with the problems of meaninglessness in life and lack of communication not from the philosophical or sociological but entirely from psychological point of view.

As a psychological novelist she tries to delve deep into the emotional built-up and crevices of her characters. She employs very beautifully all techniques of psychological novel like zigsaw puzzle, diary entries, self-analysis along with stream of consciousness and flashback. She makes each work of hers an accelerating exploration of the psychic self. The psychological turmoil creates psychic imbalances, which in turn, handicap them in establishing harmonious and gratifying inter-personal relationships. There is a complete compatibility between her theme and technique. With the help of color and symbols she reveals the hypersensitive nature of her heroines. Her language has three major characteristics—love of words, sensuous

richness and sensitivity, which suit her expression of personal vision. She is much interested in life with its hopes, frustrations, negations, rejections and chaotic flow of events as she is concerned with the art of giving shape, purpose and wholeness to life. The novelist's language and theme also reveal the meaningful correlations between the psychic conditions of the characters. Her deft handling of language, imagery and syntax in order to convey an acquainted expression of the interior psyche of her characters is superb and unique. She presents with a keen view that how moral values of women are conveniently altered to suit the demands of men who treat them as their objects of possession to be ruled and controlled by psychological insecurity nurtured in them through myths, customs and social discourse. Desai's use of various linguistic devices in order to present the submerged psychic truth is unique in itself. Clusters of images, symbols, myths, fresh collocations, parallelisms, alliteration, consonance, rhyme, different levels of semantic interpretation are some of the devices used by her. From the very beginning, her first novel *Cry, The Peacock* shows her interest in the psychology of her characters. Maya's psychic disintegration is presented and to do this Desai moulds images in such a way that the objects get increasingly blurred and confused. In the beginning only the edges of the images are mixed, e.g. the tail of the rat gets merged with father and father's voice becomes the voice of the peacock, yet they are recognizable. Later they all get mixed up leading to an imagistic disorder which sets forth effectively the chaos of Maya's psyche. Desai uses the stream of consciousness technique to explain the causes and growth of her despair. The second section of the novel reveals the gradual stages by which Maya moves from sanity to insanity. The final section which acts as the epilogue provides a powerful picture of the effect of the calamity on the important characters. Maya's heart craves for love and understanding, solaces and support from her husband. Gautama is a normal gentleman interested in his profession of an advocate, perhaps too practical and materialistic to allot time for expressing his love. Maya does not tell him about the albino's prophecy for fear of hurting him. At the same time she is unable to bear the oppressive burden of the secret. Because of Gautama's age and cold attitude to sex, Maya remains a much disappointed woman. The image of fighting and mating peacocks, apart from being the central motif of the novel, underlines Maya's sexual frustration too. Psychologists suggest that a healthy emotional and sexual life would have given Maya a sense of security and stopped her psyche from decaying. Freud attributes neurosis of women to sexual dissatisfaction resulting from the rigours of civilized sexual morality. Various incidents representing her longing for outdoor life in which she bears frustration mainly by Gautama also affect her psyche. The neurotic defense mechanisms such as sleep rituals, hallucinatory visions and nightmares, experience of split personality, adverse somatic symptoms and religious avoidance of violence woefully fail to blunt the edge of her unconscious wish. At most places she appears to reel under the pressure and break to pieces as a result of the struggle within. And it resulted in psychosis which progressively moves towards a psychotic solution to Maya's neurotic struggle.

Monisha in *Voices in the City* seeks loneliness and privacy in order to be her ownself. She is oppressed by a sense of claustrophobia and longs to be free. Even her most private self is not spared by the members of the joint family. Love has no place in her relationship with her husband, Jiban. What she means by love is only a condition of conscience. She feels desperate and finds her life a conundrum that she shall brood forever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution. She desires to be complete and fulfilled. Confronted by unconducive atmosphere, she turns inward and realizes that alone she can feel better. The gulf between expectations and reality throttles Monisha with the result that her bruised self withdraws into her private world where darkness is the natural element. She feels like a caged bird. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes, "Monisha's claustrophobia and exasperation culminate in suicide and appropriately enough the style and imagery in the pages from Monisha's diary come closest to the language of the heroine of *Cry, The Peacock*, another desperate woman". (Mukharji 190) Sleep cannot comfort her. The loneliness and the rejection of the uncongenial external world are the characteristic features of Monisha's life. In a sudden frenzy to experience desire and to experience feeling, she rushes to her room with a tin of kerosene, pours it over herself and sets fire. It is true, "Monisha's suicide is as much the result of her morbid nature and emotional insufficiency as the result of her uncongenial surroundings. "Thus, through this novel Desai portrays the agony, a sensitive soul experiences, in its quest for meaning and fulfillment in a hostile world. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The problem of Sita is again more a psychological problem than being external, that resulted from unfulfilled wishes. The husband-wife relationship is dragged into difficulties as they are opposite to each other. Raman is an extrovert and Sita is an introvert personality. She hates Raman for being cold. Her reactions like she starts smoking, abusing her children for trifles and her becoming extremely angry when the

servants talk in the kitchen shows her hypersensitivity. Desai views her as a psychologist. Sita suffers from nervous disorders, a void in her life, emptiness, even in her married life resulting in her loss of identity. Her alienation from her surroundings, from the world around her forces her to live in a dream like world of fantasy which is the outcome of a serious psychological confusion. At a deeper psychological level Sita's quest for her identity is an outcome of the husband-wife conflict. Raman's insensitive nature causes serious libidinous problems to the mental life of Sita. Desai achieves the cohesive design of content and form in her psychological novels and bridges a thought-provoking harmony over different streams of feelings and sensibility, found in different settings of human society. On many places, she delves deeper and deeper in the inner world of her characters and brings out many realistic truths of psychological interest. For Desai, the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that lovers or dears or rumbles like thunder on suddenly blazes forth like lightning, is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action. The psychological cosmos of Sita's life moves around the island and her father's fantasy. In the core of her heart, she believes that the magic of the island will wipe out the evil spell and her unborn child will remain within her womb forever. Sita appears a bit abnormal and introvert. She wants to escape from the brutal realities and harsh facts of human life. She also thinks that no one cares for her. She becomes defiant in her words and deeds in the fit of depression. Sita has travelled along distance from Maya and Monisha though she is yet to achieve perfection. She identifies herself with the jelly fish stranded on the shore. She becomes aware of the need to be related in -order to gain protection. Her escape to Manor island symbolizes her need to acquire a 'place' for her 'self' both in the real and metaphorical sense of the term in order to maintain her mental equilibrium. Her urgent desire to leave the 'madness' of domesticity and the degree of triviality the outside world attaches to it sums up the traditional concept of the place destined for married women.

In this novel Anita Desai follows the track of Bronte sisters, who chose to study the heart and mind of women from women's point of view. The next novel *Fire on the Mountain* explores the inner emotional world of Nanda Kaul and Raka. Desai draws a picture of the tragedy of Nanda leading a segregated life like a recluse in lonely hill hut. In *Clear Light of Day*, again heroine prefers to lead a solitary life in a decaying house. We find that Desai penetrates into the hidden depth of mind of her characters, who are obsessed by nostalgic reminiscences of their past life and events. In this way Desai heralded a new era of psychological exploration of inner, mind in her novels. We find that most of Desai's protagonists pass through a psychological crisis which damages their value system. Some of them are lost, whereas some get out of their alienation. The psychological turmoil creates psychic imbalances, which in turn, handicap them in establishing harmonious and gratifying inter-personal relationships. But it is wrong to say that Desai deals only with the female psyche. Her successfully probing into the male psyche establishes her as a psychological novelist whose interest is in human psychology. In her novel *In Custody* the main focus is shifted towards the male psychology. The major protagonist, Deven is the representation of male psyche. Deven comes from a lower-middle class family and his consciousness is directed towards a wide world beyond himself and his family. At thirty five Deven feels already having spent all the empty years waiting for a break, waiting to do something worthwhile, something great. Deven is presented as a romantic and an escapist, a weak person incapable of facing crisis. A chanced visit by Murad brings about a dramatic change into the monotonous and purposeless existence of Deven. Murad's offer to take an interview of Nur appears the very summon, Deven has been waiting all these years.

Deven felt another warm, moist tide of jubilation rise and increase inside him at being recognized, named and invited into the presence of a man so clearly a threshold into the house. To be successful has always been an anxiety with Deven. Nur in this sense is Deven's alter ego. In this novel there is a different category of psyche in the sense that here Desai attempts to study the helpless nature of male protagonists due to poverty, helplessness and lack of initiative. The diverse trends that affect the contemporary middle class Indian are unified into the sensibility of the protagonist, Deven. He undergoes experiences of various shades and complexities and eventually emerges as a wise man with a more mature and complete knowledge of being in this world. During the period of undergoing shades of various experiences, he suffers from the problem of marital dissonance. He is also disappointed with the atmosphere of the institution, Deven's psyche is probed. He is aware of his personal incompetency to fulfill his wife's desires and dreams. He lives with a sense of defeat and failure. The sense of defeat and failure bring disappointment in the lives of Sarla and Deven but it had not brought them any closer. The motif of despair, failure and mediocrity that underlines the lives of each of these people is repeated in several situations in the novel in the kind of homes, D-II types, that Deven a low

paid employee in the same grade live in the phenomenon of 'brain drain' and migration to more prosperous countries for lucrative jobs. The prime characteristics of Deven that attract our attention are his helplessness, humility, suffering and nobility. Socio-economic factors colour his personality and mould his psyche. Desai uses some colour, bird, and animal images, relating to the character's despair, death and suffering. Except in the end, when Deven feels his epiphany that instills in him a new courage and clarity of vision. The novel by and large offers only negative images of characters and situations. As a psychological novelist Desai has symbolically used the town of Mirpore. It symbolizes the basic nature of the entire class of society, to which the hero Deven belongs. Deven regards Mirpore as a prison where he is sentenced forever to live a gloomy and empty life. In Custody is important as a psychological novel as it is recreation of the problems and the agonies of the wounded self. It is primarily about the functioning of human psyche. It is different from other novels as here we find neither a sensitive and highly strong woman protagonist nor any violent neurotic woman. It explores the psyche of male character whose problems are social. Similar kind of portrayal we find in Baumgartner's Bombay. Anita Desai, an expert in delineating the lacerated psyche portrays the ontological insecurity, alienation and anguish of uprooted individuals, in this novel too. It narrates the story of Hugo from his affluent childhood days in Germany to the horror of his murder in India by another German. This series of calamities losing his home, business and finally his mother makes him mute and accepting. When his frantic attempts to get connected to his mother fails, he withdraws into his own world, disinterested in the way of the world, in his own physical appearance, in anything except the company of his feline friends. Peer group experience is essential for the proper growth of child psyche. His complete schooling denied Hugo this opportunity, cultural uprooting, geographical displacement and failure to connect, torment his psyche. Frustrated with the world, with himself, having nowhere to go, not getting recognition for his simplicity and honesty the 'pagalfiranghi' is saved out of his unpleasant past and unknown future by the German youth who murders him. He lived in doubt and distractions in his quest for identity, but he died in faith. The novelist peeps deeper into Baumgartner's mind and brings the inner fibers out of it. To force a way into the inside of human psyche is indeed an arduous work, but it fits into the narrative skill of Anita Desai. Thus Desai's fiction is symbolic, sensitive and psychological. Her fictional word reflects her concerns with psyche of her characters.

We come to the conclusion after a close survey of her novels, that her novels are psychological dramas, surfacing an inner conflict through aesthetic objectivity. She has adopted a controlled method of stream of consciousness. Internal narration, a point of view within a character's consciousness, manifesting character's feelings about and evaluations of the events and characters of the story. In the novels of her first twenty years of writing, Desai has used a uniform structural pattern with marked features of a modern psychological novel. Meena Belliappa rightly says, "What is new in Anita Desai is the effort to delineate sensitivity to locale, as it operates within the consciousness of her characters. The nature of the central character is crucial to a fictional technique which places the center of the novel within a single consciousness. Perceiver, whose thoughts and feelings constitute the story, is also the instrument for registering the values of the objective world." (Bulliappa 51) 'Free Indirect Thought' and 'Narrative Report of Thought Acts', dominate the writings of Anita Desai. The psychological nature of her novels makes it a natural choice. From the Spatio temporal point of view, the novels of Anita Desai give the impression of slow motion pictures with sharpness and perspicacity. The movement is in full control by the recurring monologues and implicit dialogue very frequent in her novels. Desai's writing gains in depth and intensity mainly due to her psychological perspective. The various kinds of discourses at different levels are a result of the combination of internal and external perspectives. The technique of 'Free Indirect Discourse', which has been freely used in these novels, is a distinctive feature of her psychological novels. Madhusudan Prasad gives voices to our feelings when he says,; She has added to Indian English fiction an existentialist dimension, a lyrical splendour and a technical richness that were hitherto lacking.

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