

Anita Desai: A Study of Feminine Sensitivity and Psychological Conflict

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Abstract

Anita Desai is a prominent Indo-English novelist who is a psychologist writer of the century. She has added a new concept to India English fiction. Her main concern is to peel off layer after layer the human mind. She is interested in the psychic life of her characters. Her famous novels bring forth the tormented self and feminine sensitivity of the protagonist. This paper attempts to analyze in these novels to find out the instances of feminine sensitivity in life. The socio-cultural atmosphere of metropolitan life will be noted in particular. The purpose of this paper is to note the marital disharmony in life. The main focus of this paper is to show how feminine sensitivity, marital disharmony, family relations, and socio-cultural atmosphere are responsible for creating the feeling of loneliness and exile from family and society. Anita Desai tries illustrating the relation between family women and her family. As a female writer she not focused on women but also she tries to highlight the deep emotion, attitude, aspiration of women in a chaotic society. She is a deep observer and clearly examines the society where female engulfed in deep emotional and concern relationship and the man is a practical kind of person who is not trying to the emotion of female.

Keywords: Anita Desai, Feminine, Sensitivity, Disharmony, Socio-cultural, and Chaotic society.

Indian English Literature has earned a widespread reputation not only in India but abroad too. The place of Anita Desai among the Indo-English novelists cannot be overlooked. The Indian novels bring forth microcosmic India caught in the crucible of traditions, conventions and social changes. Anita Desai added a new concept to India English fiction. Her works are different from those of other Indian women writers: Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Jhabvala, and Nayantara Sahgal. In Markandaya's fiction, the stress is on the rural background; in Jhabvala's, the social background is more important; in Sahgal's the focus is on political and social awareness. But in the Desai's novels, it is the exploration of sensibility,

the inner workings of the mind that assume significance. Anita Desai is interested in the psychic life of her characters and her novels reveal that her real concern is with the exploration of the human psyche. Her fourth novel, *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* brings forth the agonized self and feminine sensitivity of the protagonist, Sita.

Feminism is a worldwide cultural movement to secure complete equality of women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, and economic and so on. It means a sense of personal courage. The feminist consciousness or sensitivity is the consciousness of victimization. As a philosophy of life, it seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep-seated causes of women's oppression. It opposes women's subordination to men in the family and society. It is a global and revolutionary ideology. A feminist is one who is awakened and conscious about women's life and problem. The women novelists and poets such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Jai Nimbkar, and poets like Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, and others have raised the voice against women's oppression. Anita Desai has written about women characters. She is preoccupied with the theme of incompatible marital couples. The novel *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* present an incompatible marital couple in the form of Raman and Sita.

The novelist such as Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, and Jhumpa Lahiri delineate psychological conflict in their fictions. In all their novels internal conflict of characters, a conflict between characters and conflict of characters with society is deftly portrayed. The internal struggle is between a character and his/her own confusion and fears and their existential quest. The external struggle is between a character and his/her societal norms/culture. It is about existentialism, their attempt to be true to themselves and consequently their revolt. About the psychological conflict in the human mind Usha Rani remarks that "The psychologists believe that every individual has an intrinsic nature which is the outcome of different factors, and it is unique in itself. These different states of mind produce different reactions in different situations." (WS16) Any undesired situation in the life of a man produces a psychological conflict in his mind. The protagonists of Desai are not free of these mental agonies. They often come in clash with the outside life, with others at an individual level or with the society at large. With the passage of time and experience their mental perspective changes and it produces a psychic strain in them. The novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is replete with the instances of psychological conflict.

The study of Anita Desai's novels reveals that she wishes to project the psychological temperaments of the human mind. Psychological conflicts are innate and natural processes of the mind. The conflict occurs when individuals perceive their thoughts, views, attitudes, goals, and interests contradicted by other individuals or social groups. *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* Desai delineates Sita's feminine sensitivity and the other factors leading the

psychological conflict in her. Sita lives in the metropolitan city, Bombay, with her husband Raman and her four children. She is pregnant for the fifth time. She is not happy in the present surrounding. She finds modern life full of violence and commotion. Moreover, her husband, Raman, does not pay attention to her feelings. Her children engage themselves in such activities, which are disliked by her. The incidents which upset her are the fighting of cook and her ayah, ayahs quarreling on the streets, breaking of buds by Menaka, and tearing the paintings to strips and dropping them on the floor by Menaka. All these instances upset and frighten Sita. It stirs Sita's feminine sensitiveness. It leads the way for psychological conflict in her mind. She decides to leave Bombay and go to the island Manori to save her fifth child from the din and bustle of metropolitan life. She doesn't want to give birth to her child in such an atmosphere.

There is an incident of eagle-crows fight in the novel which reveals extreme feminine sensitiveness of Sita. From the balcony of her flat, she sees that some crows are attacking an eagle. The eagle is struggling to save himself from the attack of crows. Looking at this scene, she decides to save the eagle from the attack of crows. She shouts for her sons and asks Karan to bring the toy gun. While fetching toy gun Karan falls down and his chin is cut, but Sita ignores it and she herself fetches the toy gun and shots it at crows. This shows how she is eager to save the eagle. They reach to eagle to see whether it is dead or alive. The older boys declare it as dead. Next morning there is nothing on the ledge but some feathers and some stains of blood. It indicates that the eagle is eaten by the crows. Raman with his morning cup of tea says to her, "They've made a good job of your eagle." (WS 37) She replies to him "perhaps it flew away." (WS 37) But she is sure that it might not have flown away. Through this episode, the novelist wishes to reveal Sita's feminine sensitivity.

In this episode, Sita conflicts with her husband and her struggle for supremacy at a deeper psychological level. Here, the eagle is the symbol of Sita and Rama is the symbol of crows that attack the helpless eagle. Sita's desperate effort to save the eagle from the attack of the crows is her fight against the masculine values represented by her husband, Raman. On this eagle-crows fight episode Dr. M. Maini Meitei, aptly remarks: "Sita's words "perhaps it flew away?" (36) After this incident Sita's urge to leave Bombay and go to Manori increases. She hurriedly packs and leaves for Manori Island in complete defiance of her husband's hostile and hypocritical world. She returns to her father's island, charmed by him. This is, indeed, her last effort to try to save her identity by showing her faith in her father's magic world. The theme of marital disharmony is also noted in this novel. The marital life of Raman and Sita is not smooth. Almost all female protagonist of Anita Desai are the victims of marital disharmony. Desai has presented marital disharmonies as they exist in Indian male-dominated traditional families.

Desai's forte is her handling of maladjusted marriages. Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, Monisha in *Voices in the City* and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* are all women of deep emotions and fine sensitivities who are entrapped in marriages with men who are never out rightly cruel, who carry out their husbandly obligations assiduously but are impervious to their wives pleas for understanding, communication, and respect for their individuality. Such emotionally incomplete relationships have a fatal effect on the finely turned female psyche and Desai's women find themselves tortured by a painful sense of alienation.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* the marital disharmony results from the conflict between two irreconcilable temperaments and two diametrically opposed viewpoints of Sita and Raman. Sita notices that her husband pays too much attention to his business without caring for her feelings. Sita finds her life dull and monotonous. She anticipates Raman to be the life lover, making her realize how valuable she is to him. Raman, however, does not fulfill her wishes. Raman focuses his energies on his business and becomes an escapist. He has his own morals and own standards. Consequently, the temperaments of Sita and her husband remain poles apart. Sita is quite disgusted with the friends and businessmen who come to meet Raman.

When Raman does not fulfill her wishes, Sita feels marital dissatisfaction with her husband. She is not happy with her present life. Sita's problem seems to adjustment with her husband, the home life and the surrounding atmosphere nauseating her. The root cause of marital discord between Sita and Raman lies in the fact that Raman marries Sita not out of love but "out of pity, out of lust, out of the sudden will for adventure, and because it was inevitable married her." (WS 89) After marriage, Sita lives with Raman's family members for some days. But she feels uncomfortable with her in-laws. Noticing Sita's condition Raman comes to live in a small flat. But here too "people continued to come and be unacceptable to her." (WS 45) She is fed up with her husband, a businessman, whose complete lack of feeling brings her to the verge of insanity. She spends almost all her time on the balcony, smoking, looking out at the sea. Sita notices that her husband ignores her instincts, and what she likes him to treat her in a gentle and tender way is what he cannot do. The people who come to visit Raman are his friends, visitors, business associates, colleagues or acquaintances. He regards them with a little humor and with restraint. With some, he does business, with others he eats a meal. Just for the sake of his friends, visitors, and business associates, he ignores the feelings of Sita. And that hurts Sita. She not only hates Raman for his lack of feeling but also derides the "subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness" (WS 43) and the routine manner of her husband's family.

Sita is disgusted with the strange and insensitive nature of Raman, she finds a kind of pleasure in the common scenes she happens to see. Firstly, the sight of a foreign tourist who wants to go to Ajanta without knowing which direction he has to go. Once, Raman and Sita are

coming “back from a week’s holiday exploring the Ajanta and Ellora caves.” (WS 45) Their car is stopped by a foreigner for the lift for going to Ajanta. Raman replies to the foreigner, “I’m sorry, we’ve just come from Ajanta we’re going the other way.” (WS 46) The foreigner apologizes. Raman advises him gently “If you want a lift to Ajanta, you had better cross the road and stand on that side.” (WS 46) This reveals that Raman is a kind and co-operative person. After this incident, Sita thinks repeatedly of that foreigner. Raman asks her “why she had once more brought up the subject of the hitchhiking foreigner, months later.” (WS 47) She narrates the incidents of Hanging Garden to Raman. One evening she took her children to the Hanging Garden. There she saw a young Muslim woman in the lap of an old man, an unworldly sight. She says: “They were like a work of art so apart from the rest of us. They were not like us they were inhuman, divine...They were so white, so radiant, they made me see my own life like a shadow, absolutely flat, uncolored.” (WS133-134)

These words of Sita indicate that she desires the love from Raman, like that of Muslim woman and the old man. But she is heartbroken as she does not get that kind of love from Raman. All these incidents make her think that her identity is lost in this kind of atmosphere, where she finds no feeling in Raman’s heart and the metropolitan life of Bombay, full of din and puzzle. It shatters the husband-wife relation. And she packs her things and leaves for Manori, the magic island of her father. Here Sita alienates herself from the family members and the society. It is also an aspect of the psychological conflict. After analyzing this novel, we can agree with the view of B. Chitra about the novels of Desai. She remarks: “The novels of Anita Desai catch the bewilderment of the individual psyche confronted with the overbearing socio-cultural environment and the ever- beckoning modern promise of self- gratification, and self- fulfillment.” (Chitra 216)

Thus, like the other protagonists of Desai’s novels, Sita also becomes the victim of the socio-cultural and family atmosphere and loses her psychic balance. The incidents such as fighting of cook with ayah, quarreling of ayahs on the streets, disturbances of children at home, Raman not paying any attention to her feelings and her problem to adjust with Raman’s family members, lead the way for psychological conflict in her mind. And in the attack of psychological conflict, she desires for loneliness. She alienates herself from Raman and society and leaves for the island Manori with her daughter Meneka and son Karan.

Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*, as it is implied in the title itself, is a novel of contrast between two cultures, the one, Indian, known for its pious and longstanding customs representing ‘fasting,’ and the other, American, a country of opulence and sumptuousness epitomizing ‘feasting.’ The plot unveils through the perceptions of Uma, in India, and of Arun, in America. Both of them are entrapped, irrespective of the culture and enveloping milieu, by oppressive bonds exercised by their own parents, Mama Papa. They are just Mama

Papa or Papa Mama but remain nameless throughout the novel. Yet, this namelessness does not indicate their anonymity but signifies their universality. They are the prototypical parents found everywhere in the middle-class families of India, who discuss, plan, plot, control, govern the activities of their children, be it marriage or going abroad for studies. And in their over-dominating concern, they tend to ignore the inadvertent possibility of entrapping their own offspring. Thus, they do not give contingency to the fact that perhaps their children too can have a life to call their own. Maybe even their own preoccupations, their own priorities, maybe an agenda for themselves that goes beyond what they actually want for their children?

In this novel, began with a snapshot of Mama Papa's contemplative mood. Which is when a sudden deluge of ideas hit them and they order their eldest daughter, Uma, to carry out them without delay. Uma is asked first to inform the cook to prepare sweets for her father, with neglectful impatience that she has been already asked to pack a parcel to be sent to her brother Arun in America. While she comes literally running on her toes, she is entrusted with an additional job of writing a letter to their son. Somewhere in the middle of the novel, the reader understands that it is the usual scene that goes on in the household of Mama Papa. The first part of the novel tells us in a flashback as for how she became a reluctant victim of entrapment at home. The second part of the novel shows how her brother Arun, who leaves his home for higher studies but feels trapped by the very education that is meant to liberate him.

Usually, at home, it would be an oppressive atmosphere even if one of the parents is overpowering. With regard to Uma, both of her parents appear to have merged into a single identity Mama Papa/Papa Mama, as if they have a "Siamese twin existence" (FF 6). Hence, whenever Mama Papa says something, and whoever says it, it comes with double the intensity and power that it cannot be defied at all. Therefore, if one refused there would not be any "point in appealing to the other parent for a different verdict: none was expected, or given" (FF14).

Furthermore, the women are not allowed for outings usually, but when Papa feels that the women laze around the house too much, then they would be taken to the park to a walk. On one such occasion, Uma gets easily distracted and fails to keep pace with her Papa. Though Papa is far away, and she is left in the company of Mama, she would not dare attempt to buy some eatables on her wish though it is highly tempting: "Uma finds saliva gathering at the corners of her mouth at the smell of the spiced, roasted gram but decides to say nothing" (FF12-13). In the end, Uma is blamed for being 'slow' when all the while Uma could not reconcile herself as for why they are hurrying just to go back home. Likewise, the children are not allowed to have any sense of privacy even when they have grown-up. They are not allowed to shut any doors in the household. For this meant secrets, especially nasty secrets,

which are impermissible: “It meant authority would come stalking in and make a search to seize upon the nastiness, the unclean blot?” (FF15)

Mama Papa also decides which of their children should have education and how much of it. As far as Uma is concerned, a pleasant escape from her claustrophobic conditions at home is her school-going. The convent school for her is “streaked with golden promise”(FF20). Hence, she always goes early to the school and later finds some excuse to linger there for a longer time. Conversely, she feels deprived during dull weekends when she is left at home: "There were the wretched weekends when she was plucked back into the trivialities of her home, which seemed *a denial, a negation of life* as it ought to be, somber and splendid, and then the endless summer vacation when the heat reduced even that pointless existence to further *vacuity*.” (FF21) Regardless of Uma’s verve for convent education, she is forced to stop going to school when Mama gives birth to the third baby, Aruna.

Here again, Desai is not implying that the un-burnt brides and the well-settled ones may live a content life. In this regard, she portrays the story of Aruna, Uma’s smart and pretty younger sister who makes a discreet choice and marries “the wisest... the most handsome, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves” (FF101). Aruna’s marriage to Arvind who has a job in Bombay and a flat in a housing block in Juhu, facing the beach is just a like a dream-come-true. Yet to live that dream-life fully she transforms herself and desperately seeks to introduce change in the lives of others. She cuts her hair, takes her make-up kit wherever she goes and calls her sister and mother as ‘villagers’ once they refuse to accept her sophisticated and flashy style of life. For that reason, she avoids visiting her parents’ home and the rare occasions of her short visits are spent in blaming the untidiness of the surrounding and the inhabitants. Even she goes to the extent of scolding her husband when he splits tea in his saucer or wears a shirt, which does not match, with his trousers.

In this way, Aruna’s entrapment is different from the rest. She has liberated herself from the customs and dominating home rules that bind the rest of the characters like Uma and Anamica. Yet, in negating those codes, she ensnares herself in her mad pursuit towards a vision of perfection. And in order to reach that perfection, she needs to constantly uncover and rectify the flaws of her own family as well as of Arvind’s. The ties, though invisible, are so overwhelming that even in a country that feasts on individuality; Arun fails to manifest his identity as an individual. Caught in the prison house of his own family’s food habits, he can neither nourish the alien food nor develop a sense of belonging with Patton’s family that shelters him during his vacation. The smell of the raw meat being charred over the fire by Mr. Patton for steak or hamburger is loathsome for Arun. Conversely, Mr. Patton fails to understand why Arun really refuses to eat a good piece of meat. While Mrs. Patton sympathizes with Arun and gives him the vegetarian food items, particularly tomato slices

and lettuce on bread, Arun finds them detestable too. Because he thinks that “in his time in America he has developed a hearty abhorrence for the raw foods everyone here thinks the natural diet of a vegetarian” (FF167).

Anita Desai, in portraying the stories of entrapment in *Fasting, Feasting*, presents one version after another; each contributing together to a master version, and each simultaneously subverting the other towards an open and contingent version. Accordingly, in the story of Uma, we find her unattractiveness leading to her eventual entrapment. Yet, if we pass a final verdict on this account, we would be proved erroneous since Desai presents the versions of Aruna and Anamica, Uma’s appealing sister and charming cousin, respectively. Beauty cannot offer them escape from entrapments; in truth, it is rather their good looks that victimize them. Further, if we think again that it is Uma’s lack of education that has led to her entrapped situation, Desai presents us the subversion of Anamica, where foreign scholarship fetches an equal match but fails to provide her the required escape, and it suffocates and kills her literally. It also, in providing a male version through the story of Arun’s entrapment, Desai negates any feministic verdict based on the other female versions of entrapment that is likely to put the blame on the patriarchal, male-centered society.

Thus, Anita Desai, often described as one of the finest writers of this country, has moved from her earlier, typical way of sympathizing with her characters, females especially, to a different level of sensibility now. Where it would be easy to presuppose her overt feministic concerns in a novel like *Cry, the Peacock*, it would be unwise to approach her *Fasting, Feasting* with any such preconceived notions. Desai herself speaks out in a recent interview that she has been deliberately shifting her focus from female characters to male characters. She rather feels she needs to address and voice out themes which concern males too. Finally, if we consider the male version represented by Arun and the female versions constituted by Uma, Anamika, and Aruna as Indian versions, Desai offers American versions to counter them. The story, thus dangling between two countries and cultures shows to prove through the characters of Uma and Arun, and their counterparts Melanie and Rod, that attempts of escape from entrapments can only be temporary, illusory and self-destructively futile since entrapments through familial knots are ubiquitous, all-encompassing and universal. And perhaps the salvation comes when one accepts entrapment of one kind or another envisioned as an inescapable fact of life.

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