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Anita Desai as Novelist of Human Heart

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Anita Desai

Courtesy: <http://www.in.com/anita-desai/profile-21703.html>

Abstract

This paper neatly interprets Anita Desai as an magnificent and eminent novelist for moulding the inner catastrophe of characters through spirited characterization. She is the novelist of human heart who outstandingly makes her journey densely into the heart and mentality of her portrayed characters in her novels. Thus, the paper beautifully disseminates the fact that the woman characters portrayed by Anita Desai almost liberated, ruminated, fretted and tackling with angry resistance their individual problems and predicaments.

Keywords: Anita Desai, magnificent, eminent, moulding, catastrophe,
densely, mental life, liberated, ruminated,

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Anita Desai

It is universally acknowledged that Anita Desai has added a new and significant dimension to Indian English fiction. What distinguishes her from other writers is her preoccupation with the exploration of the interior world. Ruth Praver Jhabvala is said to have chosen the social background for her comedies, tragic – comedies and farces, while Kamala Markandaya lays stress as much on principal characters as on diverse contemporary problems – social, economic, political and cultural. While Nayantara Sahgal confines herself to the realm of the political or socio-political, Anita Desai, probing deep into the bottomless pit of human psyche, brings the hidden contours into a much sharper focus. Shyam M. Asnani aptly holds:

“This main thrust on the inner life of the individual, on myriads of inner impressions, passing fancies and fleeting thoughts, together with her razor like sharp awareness of the futility of existence, is perceptible in each of her novels” (P.144)

Emphasis on Character Delineation

From the beginning of her literary career, Anita Desai laid emphasis on character delineation, caring very little for the milieu. Character portrayal remains a significant feature of her fiction. She chooses to analyse exceptional characters in exceptional circumstances and her primary aim is to express the truth or the final essence of subjective life and human consciousness. Almost all her protagonists, Maya, Monisha, Sarah, Sita, Nanda Kaul and Bim do evidently display remarkable vivacity and dazzling variety. All her heroines are not static figures but they are, no doubt, dynamic figures undergoing transformation leading to self-affirmation and self-illumination. She is excellent artist, like a Rabindranath Tagore, in delineating characters of old women like Aunt Lila, Nanda Kaul and Aunt Mira. As J.P. Tripathi has put it, “Her forte in characterization is the delineation of female protagonists, mostly obsessional and psycho-pathic”. (P 157).

Truly speaking, Mrs. Desai is out and out engrossed in the psyche of her protagonists. The world of her novels is the inner world of her characters. It is only the individual and his Kaleidoscopic mind that is of primary interest to her as she does not show any predilection for the prevailing social or political issues of the lives and times of her characters. Her quoting is worth mentioning here:

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“I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or have been driven into some extremity of despair and turn against or make a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort, but those who cannot follow it know what the demands are, what is costs to meet them” (Desai 4).

Individualizing the Character

The most prominent aspect of Anita Desai’s art is the delineation of character. She depicts female characters that live in separate, closed and sequestered world of existential problems and passions with remarkable ease and adoration. The most significant aspect of her fiction is her manner of individualizing the character. She is engaged primarily with the portrayal of her heroine as living in a strictly controlled world in which fear, doubt and uncertainty prevail. Almost all her protagonists are over sensitive, solitary and lost in thought. Each of them is alone in a wide, wide world; for Anita Desai, only the individual, the solitary being is of true interest. She does not depict her central characters in a traditional mode. As a creative writer, she is interested in complex and eccentric characters rather in the everyday average ones. Her heroes or heroines withdraw into a world of isolation and solitude. They enjoy material prosperity, but their emotional and intellectual aspirations remain unsatisfied. They aim at achieving a qualitative change in the life they lead but fail. As a result, happiness eludes them, and peace deserts them. The anguish of the heroes or heroines in Anita Desai is quite different from the misery of the rural characters in Kamala Markandaya. Desai’s characters in general and women characters in particular come alive in the dynamic process always evolving and transforming, viable and mutable. Jasbir Jain observes: “They are portrayed as engrossed with the present, look backward in time and visualize future as well” (P 26).

A Novelist of Human Heart

There is no denying the fact that Anita Desai is a novelist of human heart, an artist shaping the inner crisis of her characters. Being concerned with the personal tragedy of individuals, she is “hardly infested in social life, political events and mundane aspects of the characters; she explores the interior layers of her protagonist’s mind and brings to the surface various shades of inner crisis” (Singh 31). On the part of the individual, she avoids unimportant things and presents thoughts with vazor – like sharp awareness of the internal crisis of existence of her characters. Thus, most of them are overcast by shadows, half-shadows, half-revealed and half-concealed.

Fire on the Mountain

Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* strikes a balance between reality and illusion as our illusion is the result of our inner crisis. Nanda Kaul and Ila Das are such characters whose existential problems are left unsolved for they hang between undiluted reality and undiluted illusion. Nanda Kaul entirely feeds on herself on illusion, but when she receives the tragic news of the rape and murder of Ila Das, her illusions get translated into reality.

Anita Desai here in *Fire on the Mountain* deals primarily with the loneliness and isolation as well as the resultant agony and anguish in the deserted life of Nanda Kaul, a great grandmother. She is content with her life of isolation lived all alone at Carignano, a place in Kasauli. She lives her secluded existence and never likes being disturbed by anyone. She lives like a recluse in total privacy. Everything she wants is available at Carignano and she wants no one and nothing else. She fancies she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. "To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake" (*Fire on the Mountain* 3). She is pleased by the barrenness of Carignano. There are rocks, pine trees, light and air, but there is no activity. One critic by name Ramachandra Rao observes:

"Instead of portraying character in terms of environment, Anita Desai creates character and the environment is important only in so far as it enables the reader to understand the character" (P61).

Nanda Kaul and Raka

There is an apparent similarity between Nanda Kaul and Raka. "If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long-life of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice. She was born to it simply" (*Fire on the Mountain* 48). The effortless detachment of Raka is contrasted with the practiced detachment of the old woman. Nanda Kaul wonders at this total rejection, so 'natural', 'instinctive' and 'effortless'. When compared with this, her rejection of the child is 'planned' and 'willful'. In contrast to her great grandmother, Raka is alive to the movements around her, aware of the variety of life that is there in Carignano. If Nanda Kaul shuns all movement, Raka loves it. She has a gift for disappearing suddenly, silently, not to return for hours. If Nanda Kaul is "a brave, flawed experiment," Raka is "the perfected

model”. Nanda Kaul leads a life which does not involve her “self”. It is full on the surface but empty at the core. The trauma of childhood blunts the sensibilities of Raka. Commenting on their attitudes, Prof. Sarma makes an interesting observation:

“Thus they both seek to exclude what they need
most – security and fulfillment of love” (P 125)

Raka’s love of solitude springs from her hellish experience at home. The lack of communication between the two is seen by some critics as a sickness of the soul which is imposed on them. The title of the novel *Fire on the Mountain* is suggestive of the need for communication between the individuals. “Communication is the missing link between Nanda Kaul and Raka” says Narendra Kumar. (P 46).

Raka’s setting the mountain on fire in her rejection of the world in which life has lost its meaning and has simply ceased to make sense. It is a rebellion against the essential beliefs and values of traditional culture. Referring to the final disaster in the novel, Asha kumar says that fire on the mountain depicts the “triumph of natural over psychological time” (P 55). If isolation is Nanda Kaul’s condition, Ila’s attachment brings only disaster. Raka’s indifference is but a natural reaction in an alien and hostile universe. Through Raka Anita Desai attacks the existing system of absurd notions and established conventions. The moment of realization is also the point of death in her life. In short, the novel is a telling image of the difficulty of communication between the protagonist Nanda Kaul and the world.

Cry, The Peacock - Maya’s love for Gautama

Cry, The Peacock is the tale of Maya’s love for Gautama, her husband. Deeply devoted and affectionate in nature, over sensitised in mental states and feelings, Maya requires a love partner with wide sympathies, highly sensitive, imaginative and responsive temperament which Gautama lacks. This is the beginning and the end of the tragedy of love in the novel – the temperamental and emotional self between the lovers. Maya the tender clinging creeper, cannot absorb herself in totality in the personality of Gautama, a mighty tree no doubt but lacking the elixir of consolation and sweetness of temperament which she may sap on. Maya wants love to satisfy love, she wants expression of emotions and affections to drench her love thirsty heart, her mind, the pores of her body and womanhood. But she receives only chidings to which she responds:

‘How it suits you to quote those lines of
a day stick. You know nothing of me –
and how I can love. You have never loved
and you don’t love me ...’ (Cry, The Peacock, 112)

These are the words of total self-surrender similar to those of porphyria to her lover who consummated her demand by strangulating her. Her shock is that Gautama is reducing love to mere attachment. An over-widening gap in communication between the husband and wife is felt throughout the novel which is the root of Maya’s loneliness is because of Gautama’s temperamental incompatibility. She muses:

“Had there been a bond between us, he
would have felt its pull,
I thought of him so deeply, But, of course,
there was none.... There is no bond, no love –
hardly any love” (P 108)

A restlessness always boiled within her and the strained condition holds them apart. She “feels defenseless and utterly alone” in the company of the “black comfortless figure” passing as her husband (P 153). Maya’s obsession with her childhood prophecy makes her grow insane and later becomes the victim of Schizophrenia:

‘Yes, I am going insane. I am moving further
and further from all wisdom, all calm and
I shall soon be mad, if I am not that already.
Perhaps it is my madness that leads me
to imagine that horoscope, that encounter
with the albino, his predictions, my fate”

(Cry, The Peacock, 108).

Maya’s obsession had made her go neurotic under the fear of its consequence. Maya’s hypersensitive and highly disturbed state of mind, reacting to the untimely death of her pet dog, culminates in a kind of schizophrenia – “a body without a heart, a heart with a body”. Her obsession drives her to

curious insanity. The inner, violent, accumulated hatred of Maya for Gautama, born of selfish love of life and life's joys, in total disregard of her husband's claim to life erupts when Gautama calls her mad:

“Madness”. I screamed, leaping up at him,
to strike him, stab him. I choked and
began to cry hysterically” (Cry, *The Peacock* 178)

It becomes clear that Anita Desai is the novelist of human heart, the inside – of introversion. Thus, here in *Cry, The Peacock*, the novelist presents the personal problems of a helplessly sensitive character caught in the crisis of isolation and insecurity.

Clear Light of Day

In *Clear Light of Day* Anita Desai endeavours to plumb the depths of time as “a destroyer” and “as a preserver”, holding the mirror of the present to the past with a view of connecting the mighty changes, distortions and revelations the two realities bring about in the lives of the characters depicted. Tara, tremulous and sensitive, feels insecure and her response reminds us of Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*. The characters of Tara and Bim are a study in contrast. In school days, Bim was bright whereas Tara was dull. To Bim, School as a “challenge”, while to Tara, it was “a terror”. Of the two, Bim is the more interesting character. She who dreams of becoming a heroine, envisages a life full of adventure. She wants to be a rebel but it is she who stays in the same place doing the dull routine and does not move beyond old Delhi. She lives in the house she was born in, teacher in the college where she was taught. She is a hapless quester who fails in her attempt to conquer the world. In the process, she conquers herself. In fact, she chooses to be independent, entirely out of volition. She is too spirited and intelligent to conform to the tradition. She refuses to accept an existence that would be at the mercy of male hierarchy which surrounds her. Bim and

Tara in *Clear Light of Day* are much haunted by the memories of the past. While to Tara, the memories are ‘a jubilee’, a source of wistful joy, to Bim, they strike like ‘knell of sorrow’. The former wants to live her past and enjoy it while the latter is wearied of it and wishes to escape from it. Darshan Singh Maini comments:

“... for Bim has acquired over the years a vested psychic interest in her almost gratuitous suffering and she has, as a consequence, distorted not only the structure of her own sensibility but more grievously, the structure of familiar sentiment In her desire to subdue the

world to her own pitiful purposes, she has been narrowing the ambit of her sympathies and building up all manner of buffers, and barricades against the assault of reality” (PP 134-135).

Bim’s heroic acceptance of the family and motherhood becomes central to the novel. In a way, Bim embodies Anita Desai’s vision of the new Indian woman.

In Custody

In the novel *In Custody*, Sarala, unlike Maya, Monisha, Nanda Kaul, Bim and other heroines of Anita Desai, appears not as an individual but as a typical Hindu wife, (wife of Deven), simple, timid, obscure and domineered. Sarala’s marital and material ambitions remain unfulfilled. For Deven, as a wife, she is unsympathetic indignant, misunderstanding and sarcastic. Just like any other common girl, Sarala too had some dreams for her married life. She desires love, affection, comfort and understanding from her husband. Before marriage, she has wished for a life full of luxuries: the car, fridge, servants etc:

“The thwarting of her aspirations had cut two dark furrows from the corners of her nostril to the corners of her mouth, as deep and permanent as surgical scars. The drop of her thin, straight hair on either side of her head repeated these twin lines of disappointment” (*In Custody*).

Sarla’s marital life is an unhappy one. She cannot look beyond the four walls of her house. There is lack of communication and sense of belongingness between husband and wife. Her husband finds himself in her company as if he were a stranger, an interloper. “Both are sore with each other and their anger is reflected in Sarla’s occasional silence and sullenness. Even at the end of the novel, Deven admits that his wife’s untidiness, her shabbiness and sullen expression were the results of his own misdoing” (Tandon 141). In fact, Sarla is a victim of circumstances. As a wife, she knows nothing but to fret and sulk leading a dry existence always cross with her husband. Through Sarla, Anita Desai has revealed glimpses of the repressed condition of women in society. Though Sarla is not presented as a main character, Anita Desai has conveyed through her an image of suffering wife, by adding sensitive nature to her and exploring her circumstances. J.P. Tripathi observes: “Sarla is the typical Hindu wife, simple, timid, obscure, domineered, undemanding and co-operative. She feels herself insecure and unattended.... Sarla experiences terrible dissatisfaction in her married life “ (P 138).

Voices in the City

Voices in the City does explore the alienation of Nirode, Monisha and Amla doomed to reside in Calcutta, “the city of death”. The novel is a tragic exploration of the personal suffering of Nirode’s wounded self, Monisha’s agonised self and Amla’s insecure self. The dissociated members of a broken family move to this city in search of better prospects and career opportunities, become victims to the crisis arising out of a change of environment. They all suffer from alienation, loneliness, frustration, depression and neurosis. Anita Desai called the novel an exemplification of “the terror of facing single handed the ferocious assaults of existence” (Ram 40).

To Conclude

Thus, in the midst of such a crisis, all these protagonists desperately start a quest for peace, harmony and a meaning in life to regain their identity. In short, almost all her characters, independent, agonized, frustrated, and combating with angry defiance their individual problems and predicaments, make us feel as if we have noticed them in our neighbourhood. Herein lies the charm of Anita Desai’s art of characterization.

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