

**Anita Desai -
Psychological Exploration of the Inner Psyche of Her Existential
Characters**

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Abstract

This paper depicts a picture of inner psyche of existential characters in Anita Desai fiction. Desai examined the predicament of women in wilderness by placing these characters far removed from civilization, she has consciously examined the difficult situation and psyche of women in isolation. She creates a believable world populated by a marginally smaller milieu, also she takes her turns at being reflective, going deep into the psyche where things get moulded in a different form and characters. This prediction leads her to examine the psyche of her character and draws her gaze towards the aspects of life.

Keywords: Anita Desai, Psychological Exploration, Inner Psyche of Existential Characters, Marginalized, alienation, psyche, isolated, predicament, fantasy, vision, sensitive.

In contemporary Indo-Anglian fiction, Anita Desai is indisputably a serious novelist of a very high degree. In her novels, she skillfully explores the emotional ecology of her protagonists who, while combating the ubiquitous forces of absurd realities, feel terribly oppressed with the burden of living helplessly in contemporary chaotic conditions. Going deeper into the complexities of human existence, she endeavours to evaluate the various formidable factors that make existence uncomfortable and unendurable. Desai's unquestionable existentialist concerns coupled with her commendable craft, have distinguished her from other novelists, both of the older and the younger generations. Earnestly committed to the novel as an art-form, she practices her craft with remarkable sincerity, skill and seriousness. The richness of her multi-splendoured art and her never-dying themes call for a host of critical studies from different angles.

A distinguished writer Anita Desai was born in Mussorie on June 24, 1937 to a Bengali father and a German mother. Diverse influences fertilized her poetic and creative imagination even when she was a child. Her parents, sisters and brother used German for conversation. At the age of seven, she

began to write prose, mainly fiction, and published some small pieces in children's magazines. The family lived in Delhi where she had her education first at Queen Mary's School, and then at Miranda House, Delhi University where she took her undergraduate degree in English Literature in 1957. She is said to have lived in various cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Chandigarh, Delhi and Poona - some of which are well described in her novels.

Creative writers often deny the overbearing impact of their bet theories, as lovers do their passions, though the facts may be to the contrary. It is true that a novelist does not always write a novel according to some abstract ideas or a systematic plan. Believing in the organic concept of a work of art, an artist allows the seed of a germinating ideas to sprout and grow into a plant. No matter how an artist derives any belief in a theory of the novel, it exists in the form of his faith, his aim and his compulsions. The very act of selecting one theme, one character, one incident and rejecting another involves some guiding principle, whether by logic or by taste and the mere exercise of this choice is the beginning of a theory of the novel. Unlike Poe, Hawthorne, Henry James, Eliot and Forster, Mrs. Desai is not both a critic and a creative writer and as such, she has not propounded a systematic theory of her novels which one could keep as a blue-print to measure her literary creations. However, his articles, interviews, replies to questionnaires and letters do give an idea of what she aims at.

There are writers who definitely plan a great deal, make a summary of the plot of a rough sketch of incidents and then write in a planned way. Anita Desai writes "instinctively", carried away by her compulsions, allowing the novel to sprout and grow freely like a tree under the blue sky, and then trimming its ugly branches and uprooting weeds growing around it.

The object that triggers her imagination could be very insignificant – "a leaf dipping under a rain drop, a face seen on the bus, or a scrap news read in the papers" (Ram 100). The idea, like a magnet, drags around it a great mass of subsidiary material an incident which together form 'the novel.'

'Writing' has a two-fold function. On the one hand, it is a safety valve to release the pressure building up within the artist, and on the other, a reflector to project the picture of society.

Unlike R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya who confined themselves mostly to the portrayal of outward reality, Anita Desai goes to explore the inner reality, or to use her own words, not "the one-tenth visible section of Iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean but "the remaining nine-tenths of its that is below the surface" (Desai in Replies to the Questionnaire 1). She prefers to delve "deeper and deeper in a character or scene, rather than going round about it" (Jain 66).

Anita Desai possesses one of the healthiest and psychologically most balanced minds in the realm of Indo-Anglian fiction and the sanity of her tastes and attitudes, is almost exemplary, a point worth emulation for her fellow-religionists in the field of writing. She has the sharpness and penetration

of vision of extraordinary degree, cutting things clean and entering into the inside of things with perfect ease. She seems to possess to a high degree the intuitive power of seeing into the nature of things. She is likely to become one with a sparrow like Keats and peck about the gravel. The insightful working of her vision is best evidenced in the intuitive origin and organization of symbols and metaphors in work after work with amazing constancy. Her insightful intuitions into life spectacle help in elucidating a plan and system inherent in the scheme of things in life. The harmony of sharpness and insight endow her with a sense of divination so necessary for a subjective writer for unerring revelations at every stage.

Truly speaking, not much is known about her personal life and views on literature. She is hesitant talking about her personal life and biases. In her opinion, the creative art is a secret one. As sufficient material is not available, we can just frame a picture of Anita Desai as a writer on the basis of various literary sources and her writings. Most of her novels are set in India and completely immersed in Indian life. Her famous novels are 1. *Cry, The Peacock* (1963), 2. *Voices in the City* (1965), 3. *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), 4. *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), 5. *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), 6. *Clear Light of Day* (1980), 7. *The Village by the Sea* (1982), 8. *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1989), 9. *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and 10. *Fasting, Feasting* (2000).

According to Professor Alan Lightman, Desai's novels are distinguished by her focus on the inner life of her characters and her concern with people previously marginalized in Indian fiction, primarily women, children and the elderly. She prefers the private to the public. For her, literature is neither a means of escaping reality, nor a vehicle for parading her political, social, religious and moral ideas, but an exploration and an inquiry.

Her *Cry, The Peacock* is nothing but an externalization of the interior of Maya's Cocoon while *Voices in the City* is the reflection of the rattling reverberations of her sensitive characters under the tyrannizing force of the city of Calcutta. *Where Shall We Go This Summer* and *Fire on the Mountain* are lyrical outbursts of women seeking peace and quiet in life, while *Clear Light of Day* is the story of the slow and reluctant maturing consciousness of a woman wrapped up in the world of fantasies and visions. In none of these novels, Anita Desai imparts a message or preach morals.

A close observation of all Desai's works proves beyond all shades of doubt that she is in possession of a poetic talent of the most sensitive type. Her Mayas, Monishas, Sitas, Bims are all keenest poetesses, although they are not termed as such by Anita Desai. She has imparted a bit of her soul to all of them and partly lives and will live in them. She is gifted with an acutely keen imaginative faculty with prolific power of creation of incidents, situations characters and plot-yarns. This is the first manifestation of her creative imagination.

While being a subjective and psychological writer, she is often forced to peep into the inner recesses of the psyche rather than in the outer spectacle of the world and the creative spirit of

imagination is her unfailing reserve and security. Thus, the conception of Maya and her situation, in spite of being rooted in some experience felt or fancied, must be primarily imaginative – a mystification, increased to high proportion, and such may also be the case of Sita and Bimla Das. Universal sympathy for the suffering souls is the hallmark of Anita Desai’s personality. The spectacle of suffering among human beings and non-human beings draws her mind and heart. The very sight of human misery lacerates her heart as deeply as that of a sparrow or any small bird. “She is more preoccupied with the Somber than with the frivolous side of life” (Tripathi 4).

According to Anita Desai, a writer should have certain traits of head and heart which are considered very essential for writing a novel. Besides having a creative genius, a novelist is expected to be sensitive and to have a power of keen observation so that he could be give acute descriptions and “pick up the tiny details that others might not notice” (Jain 63). The selection of characters has to be according to the subject matter.

Since Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya were writing for life’s sake, they chose their characters from amongst the economic and social victims and victimizers. But Anita Desai is concerned primarily with the portrayal of a psychological reality and as such prefers characters who are peculiar and eccentric rather than general. Delving deep into character and situation, working around the interior landscapes of people, whether Indian or foreign, Mrs. Desai is said to have fashioned out of the dynamics of ‘separateness’, a metaphor for certain aspects of the human condition. She admits;

“She prefers novels to short stories because the form of the novel gives her a good deal of thought and time (to) get round (the subject), see it from different angle and aspects. Whereas a short story demands something quite different. You have the Whole of it quite clear in your mind and you just put it down at one throw”(Shyam 155)

It is agreed that Desai is the writer who introduced the psychological novel falling in line with the tradition of Virginia Woolf to India. Her novels are certainly reflective of social realities from a psychological perspective. She closely examines the emotional world of womankind. “In dealing with the interior landscape and the psychic odyssey of her characters, Desai has extended and enlarged the thematic horizon of the Indian English novels. Dealing with the thoughts, emotions and sensations at various levels of consciousness, Anita Desai found the technique used by D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Henry James, i.e. stream of consciousness technique and flashbacks in her novels” (Tandon 27).

The most important aspect of Anita Desai's art is the delineation of character. She depicts female characters living in separate, closed and sequestered world of existential problems and passions with remarkable ease and adoration. All her female characters – Maya, Monisha and Sita are obsessed with the idea of death. Anita Desai is not interested in portraying every day, average characters but in peculiar and eccentric characters. She writes:

“I am interested in characters who have not retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair so turned against, or made to stand against, the general currents; it makes no demands, it costs no efforts. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out “the great No”, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them” (Desai 4).

Mrs. Desai's basic interest lies in exploring the disturbed depths of the female psyche. She portrays her characters as individuals facing single-handed the ferocious attacks of existence. The most significant aspect of her fiction is her manner of individualizing the character. She presents each individual as an unsolved mystery. Almost all her protagonists are oversensitive, solitary and lost in thought. Her heroines are seen withdrawing into a world of isolation and solitude. Even if they enjoy material prosperity, their emotional and intellectual aspirations remain unsatisfied. All heroines are suffering individuals. They suffer because they refuse to conform due to the fact that they all possess “abnormal consciousness.”

Anita Desai is the first to explore the modern Indian sensibility. As her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters. She excels in highlighting the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional woman, tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness and of desperation. The existential problem of the alienated self finally emerges to be the central theme of her novels. She does represent therefore “a set of new attitude and themes” associated with modern Indian novel in English.

Her first novel *Cry, The Peacock* presents the story of Maya, a young sensitive woman obsessed by a childhood prophecy a disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is rendered in terms of immeasurable loneliness. The very beginning of the novel highlights the husband-wife alienation theme by unfolding the relationship of Maya and Gautama. Maya is self-centred, egocentric, exaggeratedly fanciful and unpractical. She is idle, self-indulgent, dreamy, living like an elfin in a grotto. She is trained to regard everything as meant for her. That is the reason for the abnormality of her adjustment with her husband and society and her love of seclusion. Her sensitivity to feeling, emotions and love is more than normal. The tragedy is caused by the self-centred egotistical nature of Maya. The end thus is the consummation of a process issuing from Maya's complex personality. Psychoanalytical techniques are used to represent Maya's disintegration of personality. Gautama sees only the upper surface of her life; he is cold to her

‘inside’ feelings and affections; there is mutual drying up of affections on both sides, increasing bitterness, consummating in Gautama’s death, Maya’s abnormality. Desai’s artistic skill lies in making insanity understandable.

Emotional alienation is the central problem of the novel and Maya. She lacks companion, life-contact, relationship and communion. 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)

Anita Desai’s presentation of the plight of the alienated Maya heralds the beginning of a new kind of psychological novel. Thus, this first novel *Cry, The Peacock* incorporates Desai’s vision of the self and goes a long way towards presenting the personal problems of a helplessly sensitive character caught in the crisis of isolation and insanity. The novel does unfold the story of the married life of this couple Maya and Gautama through Maya’s “stream of consciousness”. In *Cry, The Peacock*, Mrs. Desai skillfully explores the turbulent emotional world of her neurotic protagonist, Maya. Neurotic Maya smarts under an acute alienation and insanity. Her neurosis indicates a collective neurosis which ties to shatter the identity of woman in our Indian society as it is dominated by man in which woman longing for love is driven mad or she is left to commit suicide. Her neurosis is heightened by her awareness of her horoscope and the macabre prediction of the albino astrologer. She is obsessed by the morbid sense of death which continues throughout her life. She hurls Gautam down to death and ultimately herself commits suicide. She has always in her mind the astrologer’s prediction:

“... my child, I would not speak of it if I saw it on your face alone. But look at the horoscope. Stars do not lie. And so it is best to warn you, prepare you... Death to one of you. When you are married and you shall be married young... Death – an early one – by unnatural causes” (CTP 33).

Thus, the astrologer’s prediction assumes the existential dimension and an ominous obsession in Maya. Maya’s moods, obsessions and agonizing abnormality are portrayed effectively through different sets of symbols and images. They depict her aberrant mind and fast disintegrating personality adding to the textual density.

In *Voices in the City*, Nirode, Monisha and Amla are tortured by their meaningless and hollow existence. Nirode is a typical Bengali youth who has gone bitter against all those well off. He, in his heart of hearts, nurses a cynical grouse against the world. He is, in fact a rootless drifter without any definite goals in life, obsessed strongly by failure. Like a true existentialist, he keeps on experimenting with failures in search of an abiding meaning in life. This existential search of Nirode shows his intellectual inevitability engendered by an emptiness. His existential dimension can be seen in the lines that follow:

“He was wearied by his own unsureness in which he swept back and forth like a frog weed undulating under water, a weed that could live only in aqueous gloom, would never rise and sprout into clear day light. He was proud to the point of being a fanatic, he was intense enough to be capable of whole-hearted dedication – yet a drifted, a shadowy Cipher, and his life consisted of one rejection following another” (*Voices in the City* 63-64).

Endowed with remarkable talents, Nirode remains a rootless misfit. Nirode’s married sister Monisha has shattered and miserable psychic life. She is also ascribable to an emptiness within and her empty married life to Jiban is marked only by loneliness and in communication. Though she frantically tries to search for a real meaning of her life, she ultimately fails. There is nothing in her life to sustain her. The nothingness in her makes her an existential character:

“... 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 surrounding, tell me such a life cannot be lived – a life dedicated to nothing – that this husk is a protection from death. Ah, yes, yes, then it a choice between death and mean existence, and that surely a difficult choice” (*Voices in the City* 122)

Monisha’s mental agony keeps her restless. She feels more and more tormented, puzzled and bewildered. In her existential quest, she finally discovers that it is the absence of the element of love that has made both brother and sister “such object rebels, such craven tragedians” (*VIC* 135). She suffers from claustrophobia. Her lack of privacy, her incapacity to give birth to a child, her total in communication with Jiban, and tormenting loneliness within tortures her mentally. She always shrieks in agonized cry. Feeling that there is no escape from it, she finds futility of her own hollow existence and that ultimately drives herself to suicide.

In the novel, *Baumgartner’s Bombay* is seen the loneliness and destitution of Hugo, whose homelessness is stressed through the image of cats. Anita Desai excels in portraying the mind of Baumgartner, his confusion, his maladjustment both in his own country and his adopted country. Deven, the protagonist of the novel *In Custody* presents the stage in psychic balance and wholeness. He stands at a crossroad, not knowing where to turn to. In the end, he finds strength in his inner self and restores to face life as it comes to him. All through the novel, socio-economic factor colours his personality and

moulds his psyche. Sarah in the novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is alienated from her parents. Anita Desai treats Sarah with the sensitivity of a woman, always aware of those forces that change her destiny as a female. The glimpses she gives us into Sarah's inner struggle or that of her parents are full of pathos and human sympathy. Even with all her acceptance Sarah remains an outsider in her own chosen world. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, Mrs. Desai beautifully presents the predicament of a lonely married woman who aspires to triumph over the chaos and suffering of her rather unusual existence. Sita, a sensitive young wife is torn between the desire to abandon the boredom and hypocrisy of her middle class and ostensibly comfortable existence and the realisation that the bonds that bind her to it cannot easily be broken. The novel is a skillful dramatization of an unusual life situation of an anguished woman who finds herself lonely and alienated from her husband and children. Sita's alienation and loneliness result from marital discord and maladjustments in her marital life. Sita was not at all happy with her married life because it was based not on choice but on compulsions. Sita feels insecure and unprotected. Tired, in one unconscious symbolic action as it were, she follows the trail of foot-prints of Raman that he had laid out for her:

“She lowered her head and searched out
his foot-prints so that she could place
her feet in them, as a kind of game
to make walking back easier and so her
foot-prints mingled with his ... “

(*Where Shall We Go This Summer* 150)

It is understood that Sita is a sensitive, emotional, middle aged woman getting alienated from her husband and children. She undergoes acute mental agonies silently in isolation only because of her sharp existentialist sensibility. She feels utterly lonely at heart wherever she is. In her case, there is an incurable existentialist angst and agony. Like Maya of *Cry, The Peacock* Sita is a highly introvert character. Her character consists of inwardness, introversion and psychic 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. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar comments:

“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” (P 464).

The 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 the heroine prefers to lead a solitary life in a decaying house. It is found that Desai penetrates into the hidden depths of mind of her characters, who are obsessed by nostalgic reminiscences of their past life and events. In this way, Anita Desai may be said to have heralded a new era of psychological exploration of inner world in her novels. Brati Biswas says in *Perspectives on Anita Desai*:

“By writing novels and stories that are psychological and purely subjective, she (Anita Desai) was free to employ, simply the language of the interior. She further states even when two characters meet, they use this particular type of language – the language of their thoughts of their interior selves ...” (P 147).

Thus, Desai’s fiction is symbolic, sensitive and psychological. Her fictional world reflects her concerns with the psyche of her characters.

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