

Extraordinary Energy of Visualization in Depicting the Psychological Depth of Women Characters in Anita Desai's Novels - *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*

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Abstract

In her novels, Desai portrays the neurotic mind of her women who encounter afflictions and in their marital and domestic life. Anita Desai is one of those few Indian novelists who represent the welcome 'creative release of the feminine sensibility' which began to emerge perceptibly on the literary horizon after the second world war. She tries to introduce a neo-psychological vein and projects a sensibility generally not encountered with other Indo-Anglican writers of fiction through the art of characterization which is the focus of this paper.

Keywords: Claustrophobia, Dialogics, Patriarchy, Psychoanalytic Method, Self-alienation, Self-identification, Stream of Consciousness, Subaltern

1. Introduction

Feminist criticism articulates the dialogics of the oppressed and the subaltern of women. Feminism as an organized movement is a venture by women in the late C19th and C20th to undermine the oppression of women by men. In defining, 'Feminism', Karren Offen (1988) states that 'feminism' as a term began to be used widely in Europe as a synonym for women's emancipation only in 1880s. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society. The women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 70s was a political movement which was to consider every aspect of women's lives. It was to include campaigns against the objectification of women as sexual objects for male consumption, against pornography, rape and other forms of violence against women within and outside the family. Right to education, welfare, equality of opportunity, choice

to have children and the ways in which the oppressions of patriarchy are compounded for many women by race and class were its other concerns.

2. The Position of Women in Society - A Retrospect

In the olden days, women enjoyed a definite social as well as religious status in the society. The secular and religious sculptures of the age speak of the various aspects, status and individual positions of women in the era. Women enjoyed privileges of transmitting knowledge, art and cultural traditions from one generation to another is evident from sculptures ranging from the seventh century B.C. to sixteenth century A.D. After this period, the prospects of women equality deteriorated as a result of the growing patriarchal setup of the society. In addition to the various restrictions on women, the custom of child

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marriage also was prevalent in these times. Worse than the fate of the child wife, was the fate of the widow. The spirit of the times also demanded that loyalty and love should be sealed with blood. The history of women's subordination in any society reveals how patriarchal subtexts like religion, race, castes, class and cultural codes have been operative to facilitate men.

Women suffer from traditional prejudices and inevitably have to do what men dictate them to do. Women is subjugated by man and is exploited to meet out his selfish gratification, to satiate his sensual pleasures, to scintillate and glorify his life, to manipulate her for his growth and development, to defame and degrade her for embellishing his dignity. On the contrary, men have never attempted to elevate women's status. Women were deprived of the basic amenities of life. They were denied the right to education, voting, ownership of any form or land or business and they were not allowed to pursue a career of their choice. Even in the present context, women are denied equal rights in their work place. They are paid less than men for the same work, denied promotions and training opportunities, shut out of high paying jobs and occupations and subjected to sexual harassments. A woman was generally subject to the whims of man-her husband, her father or her son due to social norms or patriarchal norms. In Pagan nations, it has been tersely remarked, 'Women are thrice slaves. Their fathers govern them in childhood, their husbands in youth, and their sons in old age'.

Women are confined to particular roles framed by men to limit their freedom and oppress them from one generation to the next. It was necessary for feminists to crusade against these convictions and delusions. The veracity of the patriarchal norms were examined, defied and substantiated with feminist theories. The patriarchal system favored the male dominance and supremacy. The egoistic predominance of men pervaded in all spheres of social, economic and political activities. It oppressed, suppressed and women were in a jeopardy of being lost in the men's world.

3. Emancipation through Women Writings

Women have to fight their battle to overcome the

subordination and a secondary place offered to them by men, to sustain their existence and make their survival fit. Writing was the only instrument a powerful weapon, through which they were allowed to communicate their experience. They expressed their defiance through their writings. The archetypes of the ideal women were powerful and women writers had to struggle to break this conviction. The concept and the position of womanhood had to undergo a drastic change to which writers committed their works. Their emancipation lies in not limiting women in their traditional roles but in expanding and awakening them to several other possibilities.

Indian Literature in English essentially mirrors Indian sensibility. It has intimate contact with the life of the people, their joys, sorrows and attitude to life. The crusade against the tyranny of caste, sex, poverty, illiteracy, suffering and superstition has been its main thematic concerns. Indian English fictional writing has seen a commendable growth in terms of its multiplicity of them and plurality of stylistic devices. Socio political realities form the major themes in most of the Indian novels in English. The situations are not fictional but are drawn from reality. They give importance to social problems faced by the individuals and the Indian novels are almost like social documentaries rather than being called fiction.

Women's writing as a discrete area of literary studies is based on the notion that the experience of women, historically, has been shaped by their gender and so women writers by definition are a group worthy of separate study. The majority of English literature programmes offer courses on specific aspects of literature by women and women's writing is generally considered an area of specialization in its own right. Women writers in India are moving forward with their strong and sure strides, matching the pace of the world. One can see them spreading their own individual fragrances. They are recognized for their originality, versatility and the indigenous flavor of the soil that they bring to their work. Indian women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kamala Das and Shobha De, who hold their own in the women writer's world of initial rejection, dejection, suppression, oppression, familial bonds, domesticity and other issues. A number of Indian women novelists made their debut in the 1990s producing novels which revealed the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women.

4. Anita Desai as Spokesperson of Contemporary Women

Contemporary literature deals with the emotional problems of the modern women, their injuries, frustration and violations that an uprooted individual undergoes. A good number of Indian writers have dealt with the experience of women rights violations and women related issues in a profound manner. In the list, Anita Desai has been regarded as one of those Indian English novelists who have contributed much to the development of Indian English novel. She has dexterously portrayed the pathetic struggle the women undergo in their life. Her women refute and defy the patriarchal norms to liberate them from the clutches of the traditional myths of subjugation and submission. Anita Desai's women are victims of circumstances in an uncongenial environment and they fight a persistent battle against her lost self and in the process of the search is doomed to degeneration and destruction. As throughout history, woman has been left totally defenseless before the forces of aggression, arrogance, harassments and deprivation.

Anita Desai, in her psychological novels, presents the image of a suffering woman preoccupied with her inner world, her frustration, her mental trauma in a male dominated society. Dealing with the thoughts, emotions, and sensations at various levels of consciousness, she found the technique used by D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Henry James quite suitable for her purpose of character delineation. Her characters have a strong basis of convictions and faiths. She has presented the shadowy part of life, especially, women suffer against the hardships. She depicts more about unsuccessful married life of women in her novels. They are afflicted with the sense of loneliness, alienation and so on. They have to fight a battle to overcome the subordination and a secondary place offered to them by men, to sustain their existence and make their survival fit. The study of isolation experienced by women in a male dominated society is a significant modern trend.

5. Exploration of Women's Psyche

Anita Desai's novels like *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and her latest novel *Fasting, Feasting* explore the issues of gender from

the Indian socio-historical perspective. Anita Desai deals with the mind and the soul of the character, the inner workings of psyche and hidden and silent thoughts rather than outer appearances. Her main business as a fiction writer is to expose the truth. Desai's emphasis on the study of the individual as an aggregate of psychic and emotional impulses leads her novels to what might be called novels of character. The main characters are psychologically disturbed, morbid, self-absorbed and incoherent in their manner and expression.

One of the significant issues which novels round the fictional world of Anita Desai is her truthful presentation of the tension and conflict between tradition and modernity, convention and innovation, individual existence and social dominance and above all between the inner reality and the outer world. In her novels, Desai portrays the neurotic mind of her women who encounter afflictions and in their marital and domestic life. She points out the insurmountable adversities that disturb their peaceful atmosphere and all their surroundings.

Anita Desai is one of those few Indian novelists in England who have tried to understand closely the predicament of their female characters. She represents the welcome 'creative release of the feminine sensibility' which began to emerge perceptibly on the literary horizon after the Second World War. She tries to introduce a neo-psychological vein and projects a sensibility generally not encountered with other Indo-Anglican writers of fiction. Anita Desai lays stress on the art of characterization. She insists on analyzing her characters, and the anecdotes are important only in so far as they reflect the obsession and suppressions of her characters.

Anita Desai is considered as the writer who introduced the psychological novel in the tradition of Virginia Woolf to India. She is one of the most powerful contemporary Indian novelists in English. She is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation than with action, experience and achievement. Desai displays an acute understanding of the social, cultural and material impediments faced by her female characters in their search for self-fulfillment. Desai's very first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* is about Maya, who is unable to relate her emotions to her husband Gautama. Unlike the western tradition, in the Indian middle class families, the couples generally go through arranged marriages and do not choose each other. But now the trend is being changed. Modern Indian women find their own match by themselves. They

have become economically independent. Here, Maya's marriage is very traditional and they do not have a mutual understanding with one another. Maya being the more sensitive, hence she is unable to tolerate the frustrations faced by her. As her name suggests, she can only survive in a world of illusions. Turning away from her husband, she attempts to find an outlet for her pent up emotions and passions through her experience of nature. Anita Desai is consciously using images which occur to Maya's state of mind. She thinks about worms, snakes, lizards are creeping on her body. Even the death of her pet dog gives the feeling of absence because she is barren.

In the novel *Voices in the City* she depicts the corrosive effects of city life of an Indian family—a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the cross current of changing social values and norms. Brought up in the serene hills of Kalimpong by an over-indulgent mother, Nirode and Monisha settle down in Calcutta. While his elder sister leads a life of servile existence within the strict confines of a traditional, extended Hindu family, Nirode is absorbed in a Bohemian life in the metropolis. Like Maya, Monisha is also childless and unable to find an emotional support from her husband. She is in a conventional joint family but feels lonely. She is alienated in her own sorrow. She craves for love, concern, care and commitment. Both, Monisha and Nirode fail to reach out each other due to joint family hindrances. She is torn between life and death.

The isolation and insecurity that her characters suffer is human and the growth of women is from self-alienation to self-identification. Many of Desai's novels are situated in North India, depicting the personal struggles of Indian characters coping with the social and cultural changes since independence. Her delineation of the problems of women are highly detailed, presenting the actual picture of Indian family system. Women are the main protagonists in most of Anita Desai's novel such as *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where shall we Go this Summer?*, *Bye-Bye Black Bird*, *Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear light of Day*. They are painted in various colours and portrayed in many roles from housewives to enlightened professionals and in their restricted atmosphere they have been treated as helpless birds in a cage. For instance, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* is half-neurotic due to over attention and much breeding in childhood. Maya's struggle is of her own creation which is the trait that governs most of Anita Desai's heroines.

Anita Desai is thus like Jane Austen, a master delineator of wonderful characterization. In this regard, in *Voices in the City*, Nirode and Amla are supplements to Monisha whose struggle is of her creation. Her extraordinary energy of visualization, as usual with Anita Desai's heroines, provides her with sharp reactions against the degrading social outlooks and ethical degradation. Here, empowerment of women is seen very less. In India, empowerment of women is largely relied on many different variables that include geographical location and educational status. Policies on women empowerment prevail at the national, state and local levels in many departments, including health, economic opportunities, gender-based violence and political participation. But practical implications are not encouraging.

Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock* is a spoilt and pampered daughter of a wealthy Brahmin and is married to Gautama, an older man, insensitive, pragmatic and rational lawyer who fails to understand her sensitive nature. She suffers from father-obsession and looks for the typical father image in her husband. Childless, with an uncaring husband, she is lonely and loneliness is the bane and burden of her psyche. Maya's tragedy is that there is no one to share her feelings. *Voices in the City* deals with an account of the odyssey of two world-weary young women doomed to reside in Calcutta. Monisha's situation is a typical representation of the social situation of numerous young married women in India. She and her husband do not have mutual understanding. So, she develops an incurable claustrophobia and commits suicide. Mrs. Desai makes each work of hers a haunting discovery of the inner psychic self.

Mrs. Desai presents the problems which are not corporal but mental. For instance, in *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya is greatly tormented and upset by the death of her pet dog. She does not have the courage to face or accept the realities of the world. The delineation of the inner confrontations and conflicts in the minds of individuals particularly in the lives of the persecuted and abandoned women under the patriarchal domination is one of the favourite themes of the writers of the world. *Cry, the Peacock*, is a representative novel of Anita Desai portraying the inner confrontations of the characters. She has imparted psychological significance and implication to it where upon she came to be recognized as an exponent of the psychological novels.

6. The Problem of Alienation

To Anita Desai, alienation is more related to the emotional and mental moods and attitudes of her characters than to their spiritual, moral and ethical temperaments. The alienated self in Desai experiences the pain of emotional isolation, not the spiritual and intellectual. She portrays women as not totally cut off from familial and social ties but women who remain within these orbits and protest against monotony, injustice and degradation. In dealing with psyche maladies, Anita Desai strikes a new note. Her characters suffer from various complexes and mental diseases, which impede the healthy growth of their personality. Both Maya and Gautama have been living as wife and husband for years in spite of their misunderstandings of views, decisions and feelings. Maya's emotional responses begin to fluctuate between involvement in love for her husband and his apathy for her. She yearns intensity of love to be bestowed on her by Gautama because it is love that conduces to her sustenance. Maya has gone deep into the feminine psyche from childhood to youth and ultimately death. Besides Maya, there are other women characters in the novel and all of them have some bearing upon her and they present other facets of feminine psyche, including the side character like the Cabaret girls against whom Maya has her own reactions and response, rather disapproving.

Anita Desai has presented in her novels the predicament of sensitive women characters. She is concerned with the fate of the married woman in Indian society today. A close reading of the novels of Anita Desai makes it clear that she has been deeply influenced by the stream of consciousness technique. In *Voices in the City*, she analyses the dark domains of the psyche of three characters Nirode Ray and his sisters, Monisha and Amla. In the novel Monisha is educated, sensitive and a prey of marital discord and disharmony and fond of reading. The thematic analysis of her novels, made it clear that the feminism depicted by her is the one which she could experience, sometimes directly but very often indirectly. She speaks about the tumult of the human soul and its depth, its poetry and pathos. Anita Desai has presented essentially the feelings and the emotions of modern young woman while the domestic life of them is broken completely. She pays her special attention to the inner sufferings of her female characters. Mrs. Desai presents

each individual as an unsolved mystery. She shows an outstanding skill in her use of a highly suggestive imagery and in handling the stream of consciousness technique, which are her main technical instruments for the psychic world of her characters. In the process of delineating her characters, she shows their awareness of the absurdity of life, their agony and despair, their sense of isolation, their search for identity and meaning in life, and their sense of responsibility which accompanies their independent decisions. The modern scientific and technological progress which has changed the conventional set up of society undermined the words and dignity of human life by looking into the psyche of her characters.

7. Conclusion

Women novelists necessarily have a special way of looking at things because they live in severely confined spheres. In the novels of Desai where her protagonist is a woman, this vision focuses on the environment, perhaps shaped by the predominance of patriarchy. Her central theme is the existential predicament of the individuals projected through the problems of the self in an emotionally disturbed state. She has no doubt championed the cause of women in her works. But what distinguishes her from the rest of Indo-Anglican writers is her pre-occupation with the individuals and their inner world of sensibility and concern. She is a great novelist of a high order and her concern for human lot has imparted a special charm to her novels. Anita Desai, therefore, emerges as an artist of exceptional ability in studying and expressing the feminine sensibility with earnestness and profundity.

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