

Women Protagonists in the Novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on the women protagonists in the novels of Anita Desai. She has made immense contribution to the Indian-English fiction. Writing is a process of self discovery to go deep into the complexities of existence. She is essentially a psychological novelist. She sees the social realities from a psychological point of view and does not look at them as a social reformer. Her focus of attention is woman, their inner climate, the climate of sensibility. Woman protagonists of her novels feels alienated, isolated, separated and detached.

Keywords: *existence, alienated, isolated, separated, detached*

After the Independence many writers started writing on the social issues. Anita Desai mainly focuses psychic condition of women through her women protagonists. The Post-Independence India has witnessed, among other things, the expansion of education, the growth of industry and technology, the phenomena of urbanization and westernization, and the cult of careerism. In the wake of it all, an individual moves away from his own native background, family and home to big industrial cities and the metropolis in pursuit of good jobs and decent living. In course of his experiences, amidst all professional success, he comes to develop the feelings of isolation, alienation, depression and frustration.

This predicament of the 'shell-bound', success-cum-comfort loving individual offers itself as one of the important themes of the Post-Independence Indo-Anglian fiction. As important consequences of the developments that took place in the Post-Independence era-the developments in socio-economic, scientific and commercial fields-a fast change of values, beliefs and attitudes has come to be experienced. Anita Desai delineates in her novels the problems and plights of alienated women caught in the crisis of a changing society. She excels in highlighting the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women, tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness and of desperation. The existential problem of the alienated self finally emerges the central theme of her novels. She represents therefore "a set of new attitude and themes" associated with modern Indian novel in English.

Her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) presents the story of Maya, a young sensitive woman obsessed by a childhood prophecy of 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 obsessed with various incidents in the life, such as her obsession with death, with the astrologer's prediction, her husband's insensitive nature, and her loneliness, sprouts her existential crisis. Her craving for fulfillment and satisfaction in marital life accentuates her loneliness. The alienation between husband and wife is quite evident in the very beginning of the novel. Toto, the dog's death affects her deeply and she suffers from the agony of its death, but Gautama's reactions were very opposite to her expectation. She is shattered by the reality which was unbearable to her. She has need of Gautama's assuring warmth but it was absent.

She feels Gautama is not with her at all but he is on the other side and world would always remain so. She slowly gives up her efforts for her union with husband and family members to share her troubled thought processes. And, finally, the events and tensions pile up leading to the final catastrophe. Alienation is self-positive of a marital situation where, two and not one only responsible for the matter. She feels hurt, lonely and neglected and nobody understands her. Thus, Maya isn't the satisfied with her in marital life. Even other family members feel isolated due to the disharmony between Maya and Gautama. Desai very skillfully explores it in the form of existential problems of protagonists. She raises the fundamental issues of human existence by delineating with force and precision, the painful human consciousness and the fractured conscience of her protagonists. Thus, the theme of alienation is prominent in the novel, which is presented from beginning to end.

Her second novel, *Voices in the City* (1965) is a tragic exploration of personal suffering of Nirode, Monisha and Amla. Nirode's suffering arises out of the feverish sensitivity, Monisha's suffering arises out of marital-

maladjustments and Amla's suffering is too like her brother's. It was their misfortune to be brought up in Calcutta and lead a miserable alienated life, unmitigated by any sense of human relationship. In this powerful novel Desai has attempted to probe deeply into the inner recesses of her character's consciousness. Her symbols and images help her to bring out the essential loneliness of such characters.

The novel, *Voices in the City* by Desai has explored the theme of alienation presenting her protagonist. It is presented in the form of Monisha and Jiban's marital disharmony, Nirode's failure, Amla's consciousness and Mother's alienation from her drunkard husband in the novel. The protagonist, Monisha having confined behind bars in Jiban's house feels like a prisoner, where is lack of privacy, her sterility and her in-laws suspension. The absence of love and understanding in her life and the resultant loneliness within and without makes her a pathetic figure in the novel. Monisha is alienated and lonely due to lack of communication between herself and her husband, Jiban in the family. It is her destiny to face against a corrosive emptiness within as well as without. Her relationship with her husband has been characterized only by the loneliness and lack of communication. She was married against her will with a traditional and moral man, Jiban who was indifferent and unable to protect her from his own traditional family. He was intellectual like Gautama who is addicted to quote from Gandhi and Tagore. But, due to lack of his family sense and his doubtful approach towards Monisha, she finds her life a virtual imprisonment.

Thus alienation is explored through the character of Monisha and her failure in the realistic world. Social confrontations, Monisha's destiny, Amla's struggles to become meaningful artist and mother's loss of affection towards her children made him alienated. All these incidents made him disturbed, dissatisfied and angry. Thus, all these individuals are products of the same social ethos and subjected to the same kind of pressures.

Her third novel, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971) is an authentic study of human relationship bedeviled by cultural encounters. Desai presents the problems of the immigrants in England who suffer from alienation and rootlessness due to cultural alienation in an alien land. Adit and Dev feel alienated in London on the other hand Sarah, Adit's British wife feel alienated and lonely in the company of her Indian husband and his friends. She finds losing her identity by marrying an Indian husband.

It is not only Adit and Dev who share a colonial past and undergo identity crisis in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. Even

without getting transplanted physically to another culture, Sarah loses her identity in her own native soil. Her situation, more poignant than that of the uprooted aliens, is not cleverly manipulated by Desai. Unlike Adit and Dev who have willingly uprooted themselves from their native soil, Sarah gets herself alienated from her society through her marriage. Her intercultural marriage does not offer her anything grand and fabulous. By marriage, she had become a nameless; she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity. The resultant tension, anguish and a sense of guilt withdraw her from her English society, even her parents, and bury herself inside her self-made cocoon. Fearing the contempt of her 'own' people, with typical Anglo-Saxon composure, she tries to cover her injured sensibility. Sarah has sacrificed her past to gain a new life. She has deliberately distanced even from her parents to adjust with her new identity. The fact is that Adit doesn't guide her efficiently in this transition because he is too preoccupied with his own problems of acculturation. He has definitely, if not knowingly, a role to play in annihilating herself. Thus the novel captures the psychological problems of alienated individuals caught in the mesh of biculturalism or multiculturalism.

Anita Desai's fourth novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), unfolds the theme of alienation and in communication in married life. Sita and her husband Raman are two diametrically opposite and two irreconcilable temperaments which is the cause of their maladjustments in their marital life resulting into the problem of alienation and loneliness. The novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* depicts the tension between a sensitive wife, Sita, and the rational, practical and worldly husband, Raman. Husband-wife discord, inadequacy of their natural love relationship and disaffection are the major themes of the novel. Like *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*, this novel also deals with the theme of marital dissonance. The natural flow of affection between Sita and Raman is very often intact but more frequently it is blocked due to misunderstanding, lack of adequate forbearance and patience. The disaffection proceeds primarily from their temperaments. Like Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock*, Raman in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* a successful businessman, realistic, having a rather pragmatic view of life. Sita is over-sensitive, keen-eyed, poetic and imaginative. If Raman is social and extrovert, Sita is introvert, if Raman thinks only of the immediate present, Sita is foresighted and has higher notions about life than an average woman. Because of their temperamental differences, many points of discord between them occur and their responses to life are different.

Thus, Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is an answer to temperamental incompatibility and the resultant self-alienation. This novel is contrast to the other novels like *Cry*, *the Peacock*, *Voices in the City* and *Fire on the Mountain*, in which the problem of frustration of the female characters come to violent and tragic end. This novel presents a positive approach to the existential predicament. Sita neither dies in the end nor kills anybody nor does she become mad. She simply compromises with her destiny by expressing her readiness to move to Bombay back with her husband, Raman. Such self-adjustment is the answer to her problem of self-alienation for which she is responsible. Therefore, her journey to Manori for self-alienation was bitter but her journey to Bombay for self-adjustment is comfortable.

Alienation acquires a broad significance and range of meaning in Anita Desai's novels. She has delineated the problems and plight of the alienated individuals caught in the crisis of changing society. The existential problem of the alienated self finally emerges to be the central theme in her fiction. She has made a judicious use of psychological insight to record the 'psychic reverberations' of her characters. Anita Desai uses novels to explore the inner psyches of women. Her writing mostly focuses on

alienation of humans in this absurd world. The women protagonist feels alienated and rejected in their family and society. They recognize the world as hostile and meaningless. Women characters mostly suffered due to their own incapability to adjust themselves. So, women protagonist of her novel; Maya, Monisha, Sarah, Sita suffered mentally and physically.

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