

Gender Identity and Feminist Consciousness in Anita Desai's Novels

Dr Asmanaz S. Bellary

Associate Professor and Head Department of English, Anjuman Arts, Science, Commerce College and P.G Studies,
Dharwad, Karnataka

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with identity crisis of women. This paper depicts the struggles of Indian women within a patriarchal framework. Anita Desai's characters manage social and family limitations; this study looks at the feminine identity problem. This paper also focuses on uncovering the differing mental states, clairvoyant perceptions, internal intentions and existential quest for man. Anita Desai is a very popular Indian novelist. She is known as the Mother of the Indian psychological novel genre. Feminism refers to any ideology that seeks equal rights for women, usually by raising their status. This paper reveals the representation of Indian women's lives, their battles against patriarchy, and colonial repression.

Keywords: feminine, identity, crisis, psychological, alienation, and consciousness

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is the foremost Indian English novelist. Anita Desai is indisputably one of the most powerful contemporary Indian novelists in English. Desai, born in 1937, of a German mother and Bengali father, is a north Indian novelist remarkable for her sensibility of inner world. A predominant feature of her novels is the identity crisis. Her works have been greatly admired both at home and abroad. Her contribution to fiction writing is quite praiseworthy and substantial. She reflects the intangible realities of life, the innermost depth of the human psyche and chaotic underworld of human mind through her novels. Her outstanding stature as novelist derives primarily from the fact that she had made extensive use of the stream of consciousness technique in her novels.

The identity is a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. According to Erikson the onset of the identity crisis is in the teenage years, and only individuals who succeed in resolving the crisis will be ready to face future challenges in the life. But the identity crisis may well be recurring, as the challenging world demands us to constantly redefine ourselves. Given today's rapid development in technology, global economy, dynamics in local and world politics, one might expect identity crisis to rescue commonly now than even thirty years ago Erikson formed his theory.

Her heroines are not mere goddesses or robots but they are individuals. She has presented both the extremes. If at one extreme there are sensitive women characters, on the other, we also find thick skinned women with blunt sensibility. Desai's first four novels are a study of women's depression resulting from their inability to grapple with their family situation and their quest for their identity. In her very first novel *Cry, the Peacock* we find examples of two extremes. Maya, the heroine is a neurotic young woman whose sanity is fast disintegrating under the pressure of marital discord and of certain vague but frightening childhood memories. Maya, a spoiled and pampered daughter of a wealthy Brahman is married to Gautama, a rather insensitive advocate who fails to understand her sensitive nature. She suffers from father obsession and looks for the typical father image in her husband. Here Desai has dealt with a sterile woman, highly sensitive and emotional lady, Maya. Though Gautama loves her in his own way, yet, Maya is never satisfied and happy. She feels that Gautama never cares for her and does not have any feelings for her. *Voices in the City* articulated Monisha's plight and psychic life and intimately shows the woman as female birds in the cages. She loves to see herself as an unfettered individual and not to become at any stage a complacent, tame wife who adjusts herself to a gilded cage.

The most recurrent themes in all her novels are "the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism" (Narasimhan, 23). Sarah in the *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is alienated from her parents. Desai treats Sarah with the sensitivity of a woman. Always aware of those forces that change her destiny as a female. Even with all her acceptance Sarah remains an outsider in her own chosen world. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, it is an irrational, childish and petulant character. Through the character of Sita and Maya,

Desai has portrayed the feminine psyche of neurotic women. They might be called sub-normal if not abnormal. Anita Desai's psychological probing of the women is that she includes females of different age groups. It is not that she confines herself to the young or the middle aged.

Nanda Kaul, the protagonist, in Desai's fifth novel *Fire on the Mountain* is unique amongst the protagonist of Desai's other novels. She is also very old, having great-grand children. She wants to spend the remaining period of her life in complete solitude and in complete privacy. For this, she has chosen a palatial old house called Carignano in the hill town of Kasauli. This situation of living all alone, completely divorced from the humdrum life of the city and the plains, severing all links with all relatives and friends, is a situation largely of her own free choice. For this purpose R.S. Sharma rightly says that, "the words are expressive of Raka's resolve to destroy a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without bang unnatural" (Prasad, Madhusudan, 56). *Clear Light of Day* is also a family drama covering two generations of Das family but mainly dealing with the second generation, that is of the children – Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba. The novel covers two historical periods of India, one of freedom struggle and another of independence. The story is primarily narrated from Bim's point of view who is the most important character in the novel. She sacrifices her whole life for her retarded Baba and senile Mira Masi since she was the eldest of the family and the father had died. The novel is also of an old woman. The novel has two epigraphs, one referring to memory and another to the passage of time.

In Custody Anita Desai enters a new phase in her creative career. The highly strung or intensely introspective woman protagonist of the earlier novels here gives way to a male protagonist Deven who is a somewhat diffident and awkward hero. He comes through the trials of life with a positive vision and self-sufficiency through awareness honest recognition of human limitations. The novel unfolds the predicament in the life of credulous and disingenuous Deven Sharma who is swayed by an idea of creating a work of his life, but fails to measure himself upto the demands of the situation when an occasion to fulfill his ambition actually arrives.

Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* has been often depicted as a spiritual quest, a voyage of spiritual awakening and recovery of faith i.e. a journey from alienation to affirmation. The complex plot of this novel provides an open and wide field for the interplay of Matteo's nagging sense of alienation and his restless quest for spirituality. In fact, with this novel Anita Desai breaks away from the treatment of the theme of East-West encounter in a cliché-ridden traditional manner. It does not conform to the conventional de-burden or a mission of civilizing the wild and uncouth society. At one level, the novel becomes a spiritual Odyssey of the female protagonist Laila, who is White European and whose spiritual quest takes her through a range of Islamic, Christian and Hindu cultures; and in the process of her ruthless exposure to multiple ethnic sensibilities. In her serious attempts to discover the variegated reality of the spiritual and the mundane world, she ends up discovering herself.

The treatment of the migrants' condition in literature is the most engrossing topic exciting intellectual debate. The postmodernist world has been the emergence of interdisciplinary and cultural studies as the major thrust areas of academic exploration.

As Elleke Boehmer states: "The postcolonial and migrant novels are seen as appropriate text for such explorations because they offer multi-voiced resistance to the idea of boundaries and present text open to transgressive and non-authoritative reading" (Bhatnagar M. K. and M. Rajeshwar 243). Thus, in the world where her identity is origin and truth are seen in postmodernist terminology as structure less as semblances.

The novel *Fasting Feasting* (1999) depicts the story of expatriate Indians. There are two protagonists in this novel and it is structured through a brother and sister, one an introvert and other outgoing. The brother goes to America and thereon the novel is about two families, one Indian and other American. Anita Desai has thus presented in her novels the predicament of sensitive women characters, who find it very difficult to adjust in the present mechanical and urbanized setup. The novelist's language and theme also reveal the meaningful correlations between the psychic conditions of the characters. Mrs. Desai is primarily concerned with the fate of the married woman in Indian society today. Her women become victims of the traditional modes of existence without a strong terra firma, which makes them intensely conscious of their lack of identity. Their protest mostly turns into frustration, for as an Indian girl a woman is brought up to be passive, meek and obedient. With this kind of orthodox background she tries to depict the oppressive and unfeeling conjugal bond. Hence Mrs. Desai presents the unhappy situations of women in Indian society. She has handled the issues of violence against women artistically and veraciously.

Then Desai has shifted to foreign land as the background of her latest novel *The Zigzag Way* (2004). Desai again centers her attention on a male character Eric whose psyche is displayed. Unlike *Fasting, Feasting* where major characters were women like Uma, Aruna, Anamika or Melony; this novel presents Em, the girlfriend of Eric as a support to run the

narrative. Desai continues the thematic experimentation with foreign characters in this novel too with the subject matter of foreign and their displacement. Eric, a New England born student in history at Harvard, is a newly minted historian just out of graduate school, unsure of his past choices and future options. With no clear direction, he follows his lover, Em, when she travels to the Yucatan for her scientific research. But, unfortunately once she sets off with her colleagues to conduct field operations, Eric ends up alone and overwhelmed in this foreign place. Then he pursues his own private quest, tracing his family's history to a Mexican ghost town, where, a hundred years earlier, young Cornish Miners toiled to the death. With vivid sympathy, Desai conjures the struggles of Eric's grandparents and their community.

Desai is a silver signature in the realm of Indian English literature. Most of her novels reflect the Indian Diasporic sensibility. It is praiseworthy that being a scientist by background, she fell in love with literature. Her novel, *The Zigzag Way*, grew out of Desai's passion for Mexico. She first went there six years ago, during a particular New England winter and immediately felt its affinity to India. As far as the identity crisis of the novel, *The Zigzag Way* is concerned; all the characters of the novel are struggling for their own identity. Apart from these, they are also trying their best to achieve identity in contemporary society.

Anita Desai's novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is about migrant Indians in the England of 1960s. Adit lives in London with his English wife, Sarah. Dev is a newly arrived immigrant from India. Adit has well adjusted himself in the country of his adoption and has allayed his sense of loneliness by being nonchalant to its various causes. Dev, on the other hand, is critical of Adit's attitude. He gets disturbed and angry when someone whispers the word "wog" behind his back. Obviously Dev has more reasons to be lonely and thus when he ventures into the city he feels, "like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison" (169). Dev's loneliness eventually stops haunting him and he decides to stay in England. Adit, in the interim, suffers from a crisis of identity. He starts longing for the land and the people he has left behind. He feels depressed of "Mrs. Roscommon-James' sniffs and barks and Dev's angry sarcasm" (176) as well as from the fact that Sarah "had shut him out, with a bang and a snap, from her childhood of one-eared pandas and large jigsaw puzzles" (176). He finally decides to return to India with Sarah. What this proves is that the sense of loneliness is not a phenomenon of overpowering presence but rather of intermittent overpowering, guided by circumstances incidental and always in flux.

Anita Desai's vision of life is one of ambivalence, born out of an awareness of paradoxes at various levels. Her fictional world is a world of defeat and disillusionment on the one hand and on the other of compromises and reconciliations. Memory and dream, joy and suffering, disillusionment and hallucination, individual and community are the central preoccupations around which revolve Desai's perception of the paradoxes. In the process of realizing these paradoxes Desai's characters undergo a process of suffering and purgation. The assertion of the existential reality of the individual against the forces of chaos and disintegration creates a profound sense of tragic tension.

CONCLUSION

Anita Desai's fictional works emphasize women's psychological struggles in a patriarchal society. The experience of defeat and disillusionment in Anita Desai's fiction not only leads to agony and suffering but also to an acquiescence of life. The protagonists of Anita Desai confront with courage the sordid realities of life that threaten to submerge the individual self in the welter of cosmopolitanism and social obligations. Though they often fail in their mission, their confrontation assumes a tragic dimension in terms of their anguish and profound introspection. They are tormented souls who, in their death-in-life, aspire towards life-in-death. It is in this sense that Desai's fictional world reflects a tragic sense of life.

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