
Literary and Psychoanalytic Perspective of Anita Desai

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Anita Desai, the most promising writer on the Indian – English firmament was born in Mussoorie on 24th June, 1937 of a Bengali father and a German mother. She received her early education at Queen’s Mary School, Delhi and graduated in literature from Delhi University. She started her writing with short stories which were published in college magazines. Anita Desai, the short story writer emerged as a promising novelist on the Indian literary horizon in 1963.

Her major published works include 13 novels and 2 volumes of short stories, latest one being a triptych of artistically crafted novellas – *The Artist of Disappearance: Three Novellas*. On critically analyzing her novels we find Anita Desai is more interested in exploring the psyche of her characters. According to Shayam M. Asnani “what distinguishes Anita Desai from other writers is her preoccupation with the individual and his inner world sensibility – the chaos inside his mind.”(5) Psychoanalysis seems to be the best scientific technique to understand the novels which are concerned largely with the mind of their characters. Her view of reality can be considered as “9/10th of the iceberg that is submerged beneath 1/10th visible portion we call reality.” (Anita Desai 1)

Her view goes in coordination with Freud’s view who’s considered as the Father of Psychoanalysis, who considered the “unconscious mind to be the key to understand personality” (357) as quoted by J.E. Gedo. He linked personality “to an iceberg existing below the level of awareness, just as most of an iceberg is beneath the surface of water.” (Gedo 357)

Psychoanalysis and literature have always been viewed as two very closely related intellectual disciplines. What psychologists put forth in theories, literary artists convey through artistic presentation. Since literature is a vision of life of the artist, seeing the multiplicity and complexity of mind, its subjectivity and interiority, the affinity between literature and psychoanalysis cannot be challenged. In modern day fiction the characters are more human looking and brooding, conveying the daily pains involved in the art of living rather than the earlier concept of infallible heroes.

Anita Desai’s approach in her fiction is that of a psychologist, a writer who is keen to draw a psychograph of her characters by exploring their true psyche rather doggedly. The life situations offered in her fiction are rather less significant, thematic strain to scanty nevertheless, the type of exploration of mind and heart rendered possible is of course, a remarkable artistic feat. Anita Desai seeks to discover and convey through her characters the significance of things by delving deep down the mysteries of mind.

As she asserts:

My writing is an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things. I must seize upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around me and try and discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating those depths, till they become more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world. (Desai 61 – 69)

Sigmund Freud, attributed the credit of discovering the unconscious to literary artists and philosophers. He asserted that he has simply discovered the scientific technique by which the unconscious could be studied. The conflicts, complexes, defenses, and the working of the inner life of the characters could be analyzed in the light of psychological theories. What distinguishes psychoanalytic literary criticism from other approaches is that it usually takes into account those aspects of work which have been thought of as unimportant by the conventional critics. It's practice of integrating these "messy details" (qtd. in *The Practice of Psychoanalytic Criticism* 13) into serious discourse has enabled it to come out with new interpretations of literary works. As the noted Indian English novelist, Nayantra Sahagal opines about psychoanalysis and its importance to study the psyche of characters. "Fiction is about people, basically about character... a novel is concerned with the characters it creates." (6)

The characters in Indian fiction are shaped after the Indian personality structure which is extremely complex and has eluded all categorization until it has been studied from the psychoanalytic angle. Therefore, it becomes imperative both for the novelist and the critics to understand the personality structure so as to authentically portray a character or to scientifically analyze it.

As the women novelists of India were moved emotionally and psychologically by the plight of deprived women, they felt impelled to externalize their repressed psychic mind and highlight their issues in the novels with a view to arouse public consciousness in favor of women's emancipation and amelioration of their condition in the prevailing social situation. With this feminist motive and objective Indian women writers exploited their novels as a vehicle of social reform. Hence, their feminist characters in the novels is surfaced in the delineation of travails and tribulations of women and in depiction of their inner mind.

It goes to the credit of Anita Desai that by shifting the domain of her fiction from outer to inner reality, by carrying the flow of the mental experiences of characters, she has brought it in the mainstream of European and American fiction. Being a psychological novelist the most common themes in her novels are complexity of human relationships particularly the unpleasant man – woman relation, others being withdrawal, alienation, loneliness, isolation, east – west encounter and existential crisis. Kadam Sachin Kumar L. and Lomte Prameshwar N. has rightly quoted that Desai senses that her novels "deal with what Ortega Y. Gassset called the terror of facing, single – handed the ferocious assault of existence."(55 – 57) On doing psychoanalysis of the characters of Anita Desai, we can characterize her characters into three groups: Disintegrated, Sublimated, Integrated and Optimistic characters.

Anita Desai's female characters are quite vulnerable and lose their inner self and hence it leads to disorientation of their self and whenever a person's subjective and objective awareness is blurred, he loses interest in the outside world. This is a dangerous state of mind, when a person goes into psychotic condition, his condition deteriorates rapidly and can result in insanity and lead to complete

disintegration of the person. Harish Raizada comments that “Anita Desai is the most prominent among the Indian English novelists who have tried to portray the tragedy of human souls trapped in the adverse circumstances of life” (31) Maya of *Cry the Peacock*, Monisha and Nirode of *Voices in the City*, Raka, Nanda and Ila Das of *Fire in the Mountain* and protagonist of the Short Story “Man who saw himself Drown” can be placed under this category.

In *Cry the Peacock*, Maya is a severe case of psychosis, who is a morbidly dependent person who fails to get love from her husband, Gautama and turns self – destructive. Monisha of *Voices in the City* is a variant of Maya who is a withdrawn creature and is given to morbid inclinations. Her mental crisis can be ascribed to existential quest for meaning in her life, as there was nothing that could sustain her. After she is charged of theft and due to maladjustment with her in – laws she suffers disintegration completely.

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* brings forth the existential angst and utter fatalism as reflected in the vulnerable and challenged life of the protagonist, Nanda Kaul. The novel begins with her, leading a life of recluse, intermittently reminiscing her past in nostalgic overtones. The author dexterously unfolds her past in the form of interior monologues by Nanda Kaul who had only to grapple with insults, betrayals and sordid saga of spousal infidelity; the pain only to be accentuated by memories of her children. She condemns herself as murderer of Ila, which finally led to her psychic death. Raka also suffered due to psychological alienation and nervous breakdown and set the hillside on fire which can be termed as sadistic. Karen Horney has attributed such behavioral aspects to people who suffer from “Basic Anxiety” (Usha Bande: Novels qtd. by Usha Bande 26) and as a result they dread the environment and develops a feeling of distrust “The author pulls out a masterstroke by cleaving these three disparate characters in a common thread of life in isolation.” (B. Sreenivasa Reddy and Sujit Kumar Rath 4)

The protagonist of “The Man Who Saw Himself Drown” found himself dead even though he was alive, is also an extreme case of disintegration:

The body lying in the mud on the bank was of course sodden, and water ran from it in streams, but it could not have been in the water for long, it was intact and what I saw was a man five feet ten inches tall... Every detail in every detail he was myself. (Anita Desai 88)

The protagonist seems to suffer from depersonalization disorder. People with such disorder feel as if they have become cut-off from themselves and are viewing themselves from outside or living with a dream as though they are dead. It often involves reduced emotional responsiveness, a loss of interest in others and loss of reasoning as experienced by the protagonist who could not even analyze the exact cause of his anguish.

Under the category of sublimated characters we can place Sita of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Bim of *Clear Light of the Day*, Uma of *Fasting, Feasting*, Pat of “Scholar and Gypsy”, Mr. Bose of “Pigeons at Day Break”, Suno of “Studies in the Park” and Deven of *In Custody*.

These characters transcend from their personal problems, and attain maturity of perception and evolve with a sublimated vision. Sublimation has a vast meaning. Sometime after much struggle if a person realizes that there are no values outside life and that an autonomous self can evolve only when the self-flows out to the world in an act of participation, he’s said to be sublimated.

Suno, the protagonist of the short story “Studies in the Park” is so much enervated due to family atmosphere that he is unable to study at home and finds a place in the park which provides him some solace, but there also he finds a number of students already positioned with grimaced faces. Suno feels

disappointed, but his disappointment is transformed into hope and optimism when he sees a pale, white, suffering Muslim lady in the lap of an elderly gentleman who is looking like a benevolent scholar with a long beard and an affectionate face. The lady is being tenderly caressed by the gentleman and there is an aura of immortal solace and peace around them. "They never looked at anyone else, only at each other, with an expression that halted me. It was tender, loving, yes, but in an inhuman way, so intense. Divine, I felt or insane." (Desai 30)

Suno feels that burden of studies is decidedly useless in the face of love and kindness. Suno treats himself as a completely liberated and sublimated soul at this juncture. Similarly, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* feels relieved at sight of a pale, weak Muslim lady being loved intensely by her husband. "They were like a work of art – so apart from the rest of us – they were inhuman, divine. So strange that love, the sadness, not like anything I have seen or known." (Desai 146 – 147) Sita regards these moments of love and sympathy as truly divine attributes and considers life spent during these fractions of time as an immortal bliss.

"Scholar and Gypsy" is a short story of temperamental contrast on a micro plane whereas Sita of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is a story on the macro plane. David regards Pat as woman of blurred outlook. They have heated arguments on religion, hippies, Buddhists etcetera. She had complete conviction in her spiritual path, when David mocked at her that how she can become a Buddhist in a Hindu temple. In her spiritual quest, she knew "it's possible to find Buddha in a Hindu temple, why, you can find him in church, a forest, anywhere" (Desai 137) Dr. A.H. Tak asserts that:

Anita Desai's heroines are engrossed in their nascent attempts to find viable means for their spiritual quest. Viewed in this perspective, they suffer the tangles of 'depersonalization' and seek refuge either in the pleasant dream – like memories of personality or try to move on to that higher state of consciousness called transpersonality. (118)

Eric Fromm has rightly said, "If every step in the direction of separation and individuation were matched by corresponding growth of the self, the development of the child would be harmonious." (25) The child who develops harmoniously acquires a healthy and integrated personality and develops an optimistic approach. Abraham Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of the basic needs also emphasizes on man's fundamental desire to belong. According to him all have psychological survival needs which include need for safety, love, belonging, self-esteem and finally self-actualization. The most basic of them is safety need. Once the child feels safe and secure, he grows into a healthy child. Maslow feels that the needs at the upper end of the hierarchy are weak and depend on the gratification of the lower needs. He, therefore, postulates that man is an evolutionary creature whose higher nature seeks actualization, just as surely as does the lower nature. Sickness arises when this upward evolution is blocked. Man's values, desires and fantasies are focused on his strongest unmet needs. Frustration of these produces neurotic conditions. His growth is arrested; he is alienated from his "real self" (17) which according to Maslow and Horney is the foundation of personality.

Under favourable conditions an individual develops as an optimistic, integrated and harmonious personality. After plumbing into the psyche of Arun and Amla in *Voices in the City*, Rakesh in *Devoted Son*, Mr. Mishra in "Accompanist", Deven in *In Custody*, Sarah in *Bye-Bye Black-Bird*, Sophie in *Journey to Ithaca*, Eric in *Zigzag Way* and Lotte and Hugo in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, we find all these characters handling the life situations with an optimistic attitude and also helped in maintaining the integrity of mind and self as a whole. All our integrated characters in the process of individuation have

revealed self-strength and a tendency to emerge out of their isolation, insecurity and anxiety and gain solidarity and equilibrium.

In my opinion Anita Desai has done in-depth study of psychology besides reading a lot of psychological novels. She is able to relate various psychological disorders like psychosis, neurosis, depersonalization disorder; schizophrenia, depression and anxiety – neurosis amongst her characters. My personal findings are obsessive compulsive disorder suffered by Raman of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Depersonalization disorder, suffered by the protagonist of “Man who Saw Himself Drown”, Acculturative stress suffered by Hugo in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and Sarah in *Bye – Bye Black – Bird*. Secondly, I have emphasized on the moments of transcendence which elevates and sublimates a person from his existing problems. Thirdly, my findings are various disorders like neurosis, psychosis, existential anxiety, and acculturative stress which leads to disintegration of personality.

In order to reveal the beauty and ugliness of life, Anita Desai deploys characters having acute sensitivity to its grandeur as well as sordidness. She’s not a visionary or a mystic but an artist, who shows, in Hardy’s words, “the sorriest things underlying the grandest things and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things” (132)

A scrutiny of Anita Desai’s art shows that the novelist is growth oriented. The development of her first heroine, Maya, to her latest creation, Ravi of “Artist of Disappearance” who lives a hermetic life in the burnt ruin of his childhood home, creating art out of nature is the story of a steady ascent towards self – actualization. One discovers this expanding vision of authenticity in her short stories where her characters show an ability to integrate their disintegrated personalities in the moments of epiphany. Perhaps her own urge of self – realization, bequeathed to some of her protagonists in the shape of her artistic vision, is responsible for the fullness of compassion in her fiction.

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