
Thematic Study of Anita Desai's Major Novels

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Abstract

During the last two and half decades a large number of women novelists in Indian Fiction in English have attracted a great deal of attention and favorable comment. Famous among them are Kamla Markandaya, R.P. Jhabwala, Nayantara sahgai, Veena Paintal, Attia Hussain, Jayshree Chatterjee, nargis Dalal, Namita Gokhale, Tapti Mukherjee, santha Rao and Anita Desai. Anita Desai is one of the most significant fiction writers today. Desai has social structure but a unique individual penetration. She refuses to accept abstractions and idealistic representation rather she explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women and also tries to strike a balance between instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. The present study is a humble attempt to throw light on the most prevailing themes and problems of the time discussed in her pieces of art. Now-a-days most of the people feel alone, unrelated to others and are unable to share their feelings. These problems form the backbone of Anita Desai's themes in her novels.

Key Words: Alienation, frustration, acculturation, chauvinist, expatriate, insensitive

Anita Desai is one of the most yet appealing novelists of the Indian English firmament. The major dominating themes in Anita Desai's novels are, the sense of alienation and detachment and human relationship particularly the man-woman relationship. Nowadays these kinds of themes have assumed special significance in the closer context of rapid industrialization, growing awareness among women of their rights and individualism, and the westernization of attitudes and lives of people. The theme of exile, immigration and alienation is very common in the literary global scene. Many characters that are lost and lonely, parade before us and their futile attempt to destination point to the absence of meaningful relationships in the age of worldwide interaction and information technology. A number of men have been considered as an exile due to political, cultural, social, economical and geographical dislocations. Cultural alienation has become a universal phenomenon. There is no exaggeration to say in the words of B. Murchland that the 20th century was **The Age of Alienation** (Murchland,16). Anita Desai is one of those Indian novelists in English who have tried to understand closely the predicament of their female characters. She herself contributes psychic novels, which she narrates as "purely subjective". She rightly analyses her psychological feelings in the following:

It has been my personal luck that my Temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of such novels, thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends upon observation rather than a private (Desai, 26).

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.” (Narsimha, 23).

She is interested in peculiar and eccentric characters rather than every day, average ones. The theme of exile, immigration and alienation is very common in the literary global scene. Many characters that are lost and lonely, parade before us and their futile attempt to destination point to the absence of meaningful relationships in the age of worldwide interaction and information technology. The present study is a humble attempt to peep into the novels of Desai and to throw light on the most prevailing themes and problems of the time discussed in her pieces of art.

The novel *Cry, the peacock* deeply delves into the theme of disharmony of the conjugal relationship between husband and wife. Anita Desai is worry is primarily with human relationship and how is the death of meaningful relationship the individual suffer and how messed up and muddled up relationships in traditional family system has paved the way to the growth of nuclear family.

This novel points out the theme of husband- wife alienation by portraying the characters of Maya and Gautama. He cares her a lot but she thinks that he doesn't care much. She is mentally frustrated and disappointed, and results in alienation. She is unable to adjust the situation, which results in frustration and disappointments. The central theme of marital disharmony and its impact lays stress particularly on women. *Cry, the Peacock* presents the characteristic contrasts between Maya and Gautama. *Cry, the Peacock* is typically a feminine and highly sensitive novel rather than of action. To say, it is a pioneering effort towards exposing the psychological problems of an alienated woman. As Meena Beliappa remarks: “the ardent introspection of Maya marks a valuable intro version in Indian fiction. It points to a line of significant development - exploration, not of the ‘social’ man, but ‘the lone individual” (Beliappa,26). Hence the novel is a powerful study of the experiences of a highly disturbed mind.

The novel, *Voices in the City* (1965) is divided into four parts – Part 1 for Nirode, Part 2 for Monisha, Part 3 for Amla and Part 4 for Mother. It tells the story of a brother, two sisters and their mother. But throughout the novel Nirode, the hero of the novel, remains the dominating figure. From the beginning the theme of loneliness, alienation and loss of identify of the characters,

is often stressed by the novelist to create an atmosphere of dramatic tension and conflict. Anita Desai's concern, in the novel, is primarily with human relationships and how in the absence of a meaningful relationship the individuals suffer. She probes the psychic compulsion that may pollute an individual in forging long term and significant relationships and how an individual is affected if he is unable to forge such relationships.

The novel *Voices in the City* also deals with the incompatible marriage of Monisha and Jiban. Monisha's husband is the prisoner of conventional culture. He believes that a women's most important role in addition to child bearing are cooking, cutting vegetables, serving food and brushing small children's hair under the authority of a strict mother-in-law. The theme of alienation is treated in terms of mother-children relationship which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband-wife relationship. Monisha is alienated and psychologically isolated both from mother her husband. Her relationship with her husband is characterized only by loneliness and lack of communication. Thus the novel is a symbolic presentation of Anita Desai's artistic attitude towards her authentic experiences of the life in Calcutta, although a novel is not life but merely an image of life. "The novel is a remarkable tour-de-force both in its narrative technique and artistic vision." (Rao, 178)

Desai third novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* published in 1971 portrays the plight of Indian immigrants in London. The novel is in three parts 'Arrival', 'Discovery and recognition' and 'Departure'. Dev arrives in England for higher studies, stays with Adit and Sarah. Dev arrives in England for higher studies. In the second part Dev is changed. In part three Adit develops home sickness for India. Dev stay on there. In *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* Adit and Dev are the two poles of the thematic burden of enchantment and disenchantment of England. Adit analyses his fascination for England in the following ways:

I like the pubs, I like the freedom a man has here-economic freedom/social freedom/...and I like the Thames. I like old Ma Jankins who cleans my rooms...And I like weekend at the Seaside. I even like the B.B.C"⁶ (Desai, 20-21).

Anita Desai in *Bye - Bye, Blackbird* deals with "the psycho - emotional and socio -Psychic states of the protagonists living in alien and cloistered world of existential problems and Passions. Alienation in her novels is presented in the form of tension between self and society." (Hariparasanna, 81). Desai, an expert in delineating the lacerated psyche portrays the ontological insecurity, alienation and anguish of uprooted individuals through three different yet related characters Dev, Adit and his English wife Sarah. The thematic and plot pattern in the novel is based on the characters of Adit and Dev, two Indians living in England. Adit is always elated by one idea or the other and he is inspired by the lines of the song he sings. He is now tolerant to the humiliations of the white people. His enchantment of the West disappears giving him place to return home. In this return what he finds is his wife Sarah.

We would take up Bye-Bye Black Bird which has an international theme in the sense that Adit marries an English girl Sarah and by doing so he incurs the anger of the white society. In Sarah's case the problem becomes more complicated for she has married a person whose race was once

ruled over by her own in spite of 'progress' and 'modernity' old prejudices die hard. Sarah's problem is human. She wants to be a real person whether English or Indian.

She tries her best to remain a sincere wife seeing to it that her marital life is not destroyed. Her husband realises falseness of his existence in England and Sarah also knows it full well:

"His whole personality seemed to her to have cracked apart into an unbearable number of disjointed pieces, rattling together noisily and disharmoniously"
(Desai, 200).

The above study of the novel shows that even though socially Sarah is not very happy because of racial prejudice of her people yet as a wife she very sensibly takes care of thing. And in the novel ends with their departure to India bidding goodbye: ***Bye-Bye Black Bird***.

In Desai's fourth novel, ***Where Shall We Go This Summer ?*** (1975), the heroin is a middle-aged woman in her forties with four children and expecting the fifth. Sita is a daughter of freedom fighter, while her husband Raman is a factory owner and down-to-earth realist. Raman's father and Sita's father were friends. Anita Desai chooses marital discord as the subject matter of this novel and highlights how the inability to lay bare one's soul and express freely one's fear and anguish result in the snapping of communication between husband and wife.

The study of Anita Desai's novels reveals that she wishes to project the psychological temperaments of the human mind. Psychological conflicts are innate and natural processes of the mind. The conflict occurs when individuals perceive their thoughts, views, attitudes, goals and interests contradicted by other individuals or social groups. In ***Where Shall We Go This Summer?*** Desai delineates Sita's feminine sensitivity and the other factors leading the psychological conflict in her.

In ***Where Shall we Go This Summer?*** the marital disharmony results from the conflict between two irreconcilable temperaments and two diametrically opposed view points of Sita and Raman. Sita notices that her husband pays too much attention to his business without caring her feelings. Sita finds her life dull and monotonous. She anticipates Raman to be the life lover, making her realize how valuable she is to him. Raman however does not fulfill her wishes. Raman focuses his energies on his business and becomes an escapist. Sita is quite disgusted with the friends and businessmen who come to meet Raman. She remarks about them:

"They are nothing--nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals." (Desai, 43)

The theme of marital disharmony is also noted in this novel. The marital life of Raman and Sita is not smooth. Almost all female protagonist of Anita Desai are the victims of marital disharmony. Desai has presented marital disharmonies as they exist in Indian male dominated traditional families. Desai's forte is her handling of maladjusted marriages. Maya (in ***Cry the Peacock***), Monisha (in ***Voices in the City***) and Sita (in ***Where Shall we Go This Summer ?***) are all

women of deep emotions and fine sensitivities who are entrapped in marriages with men. Such emotionally incomplete relationships have a fatal effect on the finely turned female psyche and Desai's women find themselves tortured by a painful sense of alienation. Thus, like the other protagonists of Desai's novels, Sita also becomes the victim of socio cultural and family atmosphere and loses her psychic balance. She desires for loneliness. She alienates herself from Raman and society and leaves for the island Manori with her daughter Meneka and son Karan.

In her fifth novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), all the major characters are female characters. It deals with the theme of in communication and lack of understanding in marital life. Nanda Kaul, an old widow of an ex-Vice-Chancellor, who cogitates on the varied roles that she has performed as a daughter, wife, mother, grandmother and great grandmother in her past and present Life the Vice-Chancellor had long ordeal with only the duties and responsibilities of her position without any love attached to it. She is disillusioned with her selfish, infidel husband, who "treated her simply as some useful object" (Solanki, 49).

Desai in this novel depicts the psychic condition of her protagonist. Nanda kaul wished
"to be alone, to have Carignano to herself,
in this period of her life when stillness and
calm were all that she wishes to entertain".
(Patil. 63)

In describing the central theme of the novel, the flesh-back technique is used. The novel centers round the character of Nanda kaul. She is ideal for the development of the theme. The novel depicts the agonized cry of Nanda Kaul. Raka, her granddaughter, is an unusual child. The lifelong unfaithfulness of Mr. Kaul to Nanda and the hypocritical situation forces her to accept this alienation. Ila das is sincere in performing her duties. But she is brutally assaulted, raped and murdered by Preet Singh because of her attempt to stop the disastrous child marriage of Preet's daughter. In fact she has no match in Desai's fictional work. Thus the novel presents an uncounscious revenge and violence in her thoughts.

The Village by the Sea: an Indian family story is a novel for young people. *The Village by the Sea* in Anita Desai's novels the inner workings, the inner sensibilities are more compelling than the outer weather, or the visible action. Her strong point is an exploration of sensibilities.

Anita Desai writes the novel, *The Village by the Sea* (1982) in order to depict several themes. It is a really moving novel which revolves round the story of an Indian rural family which is virtually crippled by poverty and helplessness.

The story of the novel, *The Village by the Sea* (1982) is woven around an alcoholic fisherman, his sick wife and their four children – Lila, Bela, Kamal, and Hari. Here Desai describes human relations, man's relation with woman, and man's relation with God in the real village Thul, situated in the western coast of India. Village life with the advent of modern technology and machinery becomes commercial. Consequently, the purity and chastity of human love is violated. The happy married life is richer and better in Thul without industrial development. *The Village by the Sea* in Anita Desai's novels the inner workings, the inner sensibilities are more compelling than the outer weather, or the visible action. Her strong point is an exploration of sensibilities. But *The Village by the Sea* is a departure from her familiar preoccupation with the problem of human psyche. Here Desai not only contrasts the rural life with the mechanical life of Bombay but explains a comparative picture in which some of the evil of rustic life, such as magic cure and penury, could be transfigured with science and industrialization. Thus the novel exhibits her vivid conception of

rural life.

Thus in all her novels, Anita Desai has presented the predicament of sensitive women characters, who find it very difficult to adjust in the present mechanical and urbanized setup. Her woman has become a victim to the tendency of society to condition a girl-child to submit to the norms of the patriarchal set-up. Desai as a true humanist has put the blame not only on men who are suffering with the complex of male-superiority but also on women who have oppressed their own kind. In this way Anita Desai has presented the unhappy situations of women in Indian society in all her novels. The major dominating themes in Anita Desai's novels are, the sense of alienation and detachment and human relationship particularly the man-woman relationship. Nowadays these kinds of themes have assumed significance in the closer context of rapid industrialization, growing awareness among women of their rights and individualism, and the westernization of attitudes and lives of people.

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