

From Chaos to Cosmos: A Perspective on Anita Desai's Creativity

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Abstract. An autobiography is meant to locate those moments of being in which the self coincides with self and intuitively recognises an existential rightness and an underlying pattern. An artist though makes use of materials from his personal life, the personal element, when treated artistically, is changed beyond recognition and acquires universal applicability. The work of almost all the novelists has its roots in their biographies. Anita Desai is one of the most powerful Indian novelists in English. She has enriched the tradition of the Indian novel in English. Her writings reveal inner realities and psychic reverberations of her characters. The present paper intends to present Anita Desai who believes more in sensibility rather than action.

Keywords : Alienation; isolation; insecurity; creative release; feminine sensibility.

In the post-modern age, the autobiographical touch is a rendering of the artist's own personality in the truest sense of the term. Certainly autobiography, at its best, is engaged with ontological questions, with true and false modes of being in the world. Virginia Woolf in her fragment of an autobiography *A Sketch of the Past* establishes some of the necessary terms when she refers to 'moments of being' and 'moments of non-being' and claims that the moments of non-being prevail. Part of the task of an autobiography, it is suggested, is to locate those moments of being in which the self coincides with self and intuitively recognises an existential rightness and an underlying pattern. Byron very truly remarks :

My passions were developed very early—so early,
that few would believe me, if I were to state the period,
and the facts which accompanied it. (Wain 67)

An artist though makes use of materials from his personal life but in the work of a truly great artist, the personal element, when treated artistically, is changed beyond recognition and acquires universal applicability even though the root may lie in private experience. The work of all the novelists under review for the purpose has its roots in their biographies leading to the theme of alienation, therefore it would be worthwhile to take a close look at their lives and backgrounds.

Anita Desai was born on 24th June 1937 at Mussoorie of a German mother and a Bengali father. Antoinette Nime, her mother and Dhiren Mazumdar, her father, returned to India after having spent many years in Germany studying engineering

and decided to live in Delhi rather than in Dhiren's native place in Dacca, perhaps because his family in Dacca was not too enthusiastic about his *firanghi* wife. So they were cut off from his family in Bengal and the Bengali background. The East Bengal partition, in the wake of British withdrawal in 1947, finally sealed his dissociation from Bengal. Anita was able to visit Bengal only after a decade when she was about twenty. The Mazumdars settled in New Delhi on Underhill Road. At home, Anita spoke with her mother in German. Her father, Dhiren Mazumdar, too spoke German very well. The family conversation thus was often in German, though English and Hindi were also used. Frequently, there were visitors to the house who spoke only German well. Although they spoke English, Hindi and German at home, yet Anita preferred to write and read in English. Anita Desai confesses :

According to the rules laid by critics, I ought to be writing half my work in Bengali, the other half in German. As it happens, I have never written a word in either language. Possibly I found English to be a suitable link language, a compromise. But I can state definitely that I did not choose English in a deliberate and conscious act. If it did not sound like a piece of arrogance, I'd say perhaps it was the language that chose me. But I am not aware of any act of choice. I started writing stories in English at the age of seven, and have been doing so for thirty years now without stopping to think why. (Desai 7)

She further admits:

I am willing to expose myself in relation to language in so far as to say that I am very glad to be writing in a language as rich, as flexible, supple, adaptable, varied and vital as English. It is the language of both reason and instinct, of sense and sensibility. It is capable of prose and poetry. It answers my every need. I do believe it is even capable of taking on an Indian character, an Indian flavour, purely by reflection. (8)

Anita received her education in Delhi at Queen Mary's School then at Miranda House, Delhi University where she took her B.A. in English Literature in 1957. She worked for a year in Max Muller Bhavan, Calcutta, then married Ashvin Desai, and has four children. Since then she has lived in Kolkata, Mumbai, Chandigarh, Delhi and Poone.

Anita Desai started her creative career at the age of seven. She once confessed :

I used to fill up whole notebooks with my stories, sitting at a round green table on a small 'mora', usually in the afternoon when the others were asleep or reading. (Ram 38)

Her earlier pieces were published in an American children's magazine. When she was in college, her stories appeared in "Thought" and "Quest" and later she contributed her stories to "Envoy". She wrote her maiden novel *Cry the Peacock*, sometime after she was married. Her writing, indeed, was always an integral part of her daily routine. Till date she has to her credit eight novels, twelve short stories, two books for children and some reviews. Her novels include *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) and *The Village by the Sea* (1983). The first two novels were published in London –*Fire on the Mountain* was first published in England (by Heinemann), then in America and later in India. Her first book has been translated into Rumanian. *The Peacock Garden* (1974) and *Cat on a Houseboat* (1974) are her fine books for children. Her short stories – "Circus Cat, Alley Cat", "How Gentle is the Mist", "Grandmother", "An Examination": Ghost House", "Mr. Bose's Private Bliss", "To Sell a Picture", "Private Tuition by Mr. Bose" Descent from the Rooftop, Surface Texture, the Accompanist, and Pineapple Cake–have been published in magazines like *Thought, the Illustrated Weekly of India, Writers Workshop, Quest, Envoy, Indian Literature, Femina* and *the Journal of Indian Writing in English*.

Anita Desai is one of the most powerful Indian novelists in English of the present times. She represents the welcome "creative release of the feminine sensibility" (Rao 50) which began to emerge after the Second World War. She is a novelist of considerable merit. She has enriched the tradition of the Indian novel in English. Her innovations make her "a distributing and demanding presence in Indian English fiction." (Money 216) She is an artist of a high order and her concern for human lot has imparted profound appeal to her novels. She is not satisfied with most of the contemporary ways of writing novel. She expresses her feelings in an article on "Women Writers":

With all the richness of material at hand, Indian women writers have stopped short—from a lack of imagination, courage, nerve of gusto of the satirical edge, the ironic tone, the inspired criticism or the lyric response that alone might have brought their

novels to life. In these last few years of their articulacy, they have been content to record and document. (Quest 1970. 43)

Anita Desai excels in writing psychological novels. She would however, call them 'purely subjective'. She confides :

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 on observation rather than a private vision. (Dhawan 235)

It is this "private vision" (Pathak 12) that she tries to encapsulate in her novels. Her writings reveal inner realities and psychic reverberations of her characters. As K R S Iyengar points out:

Her forte is the exploration of sensibility— the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is ill at ease in a sterile set up. (Iyengar 464)

In an interview, however, Mrs. Desai denied to have deliberately tried to "incorporate any aspects of the modern sensibility" in her novels. She acknowledged:

Of course, I do write of the contemporary scene and therefore the characters must contain modern sensibility. (Ram 24)

Anita Desai's presentation of the plight of the alienated Maya may not be always convincing and profound, but it heralds the beginning of a new kind of psychological novel – a novel of sensibility rather than action. (Pathak 18) Her first novel incorporates her vision of the self and goes a long way towards presenting the personal problems of a helplessly sensitive character caught in the crisis of isolation and insecurity. The novel unfolds the story of the married life of the couple through Maya's 'stream of consciousness' which is recorded in rich, sensuous and sometimes truly poetic prose.

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