

Role of Female Characters in Major Novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract . The present paper seeks to explore the role of female characters in the major novels of Anita Desai. No Society or country can ever progress without an active participation of women in its overall development. Although the place of women in society differs from culture to culture and from age to age, yet one fact common to almost all societies is that women have never been considered equal to men. The concept of emancipation of women didn't confine itself to socio-political spheres but it found its articulation in the creative art in literature. Feminism, too is an outcome of suppression for ages. When freedom is limited by some people in the family or society, particularly in the case of female, it leads to frustration. The feminist movement, thus aims at providing equal social, economic and emotional status to women. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change. The women novelists have moved from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards female characters searching for identity. Anita Desai, through her novels, has highlighted the causes that make the women victims of tension, worries, disappointment, anxiety, anger, indignation, depression and alienation. The paper will present Anita Desai's feminism as she is a strong voice of female identity and assertion in Indian writing in English. Being enlightened and exposed to the nuances of life in East and West, she is able to deal with the situation efficiently. Desai probes into the inner consciousness of women protagonists and explores the realities of their lives.

Keywords : Feminism; self-sacrificing; enduring; depression; alienation

Anita Desai is one of the most outstanding novelists in Indian Writing in English. She was born in Mussoorie, India on June 24, 1937; her published works include novels, children's books and short stories. She is a member of the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi and fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London. She has been shortlisted for the Booker prize three times. Her daughter, the author Kiran Desai, is the winner of the 2006 Booker prize.

Anita Desai is recognised as the first Indian author writing in English who addresses feminist themes seriously, focusing on the condition of women in India. Unlike Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandaya, for example, who respond primarily to the external social and political circumstances of their female characters, Desai focuses on the exploration of the psychological conditions of the oppressed heroines.

In her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* she has depicted Maya, the central character who kills her husband Gautama and then herself commits suicide, "And there was fear on his face as he started down at me, holding me fiercely". He has to unburden himself of the responsibility of a grown up daughter and he does just that in a way that looks the easiest. Such tendency on the part of fathers is not surprising in India where a daughter is held to be a mortgage and a son a dividend. Having married her off, he indeed, becomes indifferent to her :

His daughter? Ah yes, she had married and gone away. his son, Ah yes, he, too, was away, would they return? He raised his beautiful manicured hands above his shoulders, shrugged, smiled. who knows?... (*Cry, the Peacock* 142)

He even becomes irregular with his letters. Maya complains at one place :

Nobody! I shouted, flinging myself down on the chair under the futile fan "Nobody writes to me. Not even father – and I'm waiting to hear from him about his plans for the summer. He knows I'm waiting. (129)

That was the time when Maya complains from place to place and time to time and why she complained to his father suggested to her and related to her whole work time and situations with her plans.

Voices in the City is considered to be an epic on Calcutta. It is Desai's second novel, which is devoted to the analysis of the dark domains of the psyche of three characters – Nirode Ray and his sisters Monisha and Amla. Maya's unresolved father-fixation and her unhappy relationship with Gautama is the major concern in *Cry, the Peacock*. In *Voices in the City* the novelist dwells upon the case of the main protagonist, Nirode. Even Monisha and Amla are not free from the disease which, when coupled with the morbid temperament of Monisha, drives her to self-immolation. Maya is an introvert with excessive sensitivity. Her relationship with Jiban, her husband is marked by loneliness and incommunication. Monisha has no harmonious relationship with her husband, Jiban, who is financially well off and is decently placed. There is no reference to any intimate conversation between them. Monisha, on the other hand, loves privacy and aloneness. In Jiban's crowded household she feels tormented as she is often surrounded by those family members who have nothing in common with Monisha. They are preoccupied with cutting

vegetables, serving food, brushing small children's hair. She doesn't mind doing all this, but longs for something which can be done alone in privacy :

Alone, I could work better and I should feel more –
Whole but less and less there is privacy. Even my
own room, which they regarded at first as still bridal,
now no longer is so... But I wish they would leave
me alone, sometime, to read.

(*Voices in the City* 115-116)

Bye - Bye Blackbird is divided into three parts - Arrival, Discovery and Recognition. It is the story of many Asians who seek out greener pastures in the western world. Fed up with state of things in their country, they move out into foreign shores only to be dis-illusioned at the cold reception they get there. This novel is the story of Adit and Dev, two immigrants to London. Adit comes from a well-to-do educated Bengali family in Calcutta. He does try to find a job in his native place but the nature of his clerical job with all its dinginess, unpunctuality and slowness puts him off. He gets back to London and marries an English girl, Sarah and incorporates all English manners and values in himself. The latest immigrant is Dev, his friend who has gone there to study at the London School of Economics and is appalled to say the way the Asians are treated there.

In her time and situation she says, if one opts life one must compromise with it like Sita. Sita is the central character in *Where shall we go this Summer?* Here we find conflict between conformity and rebellion; the "yes" and "no". After that we want to move on her feelings and thoughts towards *Fire on the Mountain*. It is a fictional metaphor of existentialist philosophy. She was awarded Sahitya Akademi Award for *Fire on the Mountain*. Anita Desai has been described as a 'four dimensional piece'.....? This novel mainly deals with the loneliness and isolation as well as the resultant anguish and agony in the deserted life of an old widow. Nanda Kaul lives in Carignano, a rather desolate and haunted house in Kasauli, away from :

the world of bags, and letters, messages and
demands, requests and promises and queries; she
had wanted...to be left to the pines and cicadas
alone... Everything she wanted was here at
Carignano in Kasauli. Here on the ridge of the
mountain in this quiet house... She wanted no one
and nothing else. Whatever else came of happened
here would be welcome intrusion and distraction.
(*Fire on the Mountain* 17)

That was the situation when widow felt the present situation of the hungering but that time she hasn't got the full desire of realistic life. According to a critic a hungry man is next to god so the writer thought about loneliness at that time.

Her collection of short stories titled *Games at Twilight and Others* has been written by Anita Desai. In *Baumgartner's Bombay* Desai makes it a point to elaborate the fate of a German in British India during the war, though the position of Toni Mazumdar was not analogous. Still, Hugo's experiences as a German, even though a Jew, embodies Anita's fears for her mother during the war. Toni's death in the mid-seventies put an end to Anita's only tangible link with Germany. But the urge to confront her German past and to appreciate its implications was always present in her mind. Desai's mixed parentage gave her she felt an unusual advantage :

They created for me a synthesis which is the base of work and (for which) I did not have to strive for. I am sure this is what makes my writing whatever it is ; I see India through the eyes of my mother, as an outsider, but my feelings for India are my father's of someone born here. (*Baumgartner's Bombay* 4)

Manisha is the central character in Desai's novel *Voices in the City*, while Uma is the central character of the novel *Fasting, Feasting*. It is divided into two parts. The first part deals with Uma's story, a female protagonist, and characteristically, its prevalent setting is a domestic environment. As such it is representation of the "accumulation of unrecorded life". On the contrary, the main hero of the second part Arun is put into a large world, an emblematically masculine environment. In each part respective sets of values and sensitivity are associated with its main character; the first is situated in India (the country of "Fasting", which refers not only to the religious aspects, but also to an unwilling "Fasting" of the many poor of the country) and the second in the United States (the country of "Feasting" abundance). However, there is an apparent difference as concerning the nature of perception of the two main personages. The "Fasting" and the "Feasting" of the individual characters is relative and multiple at the same time as perceived by the main protagonists of each part respectively. According to Anita Desai, "My religion forbids me to drink... but here in this country, what am I to do? I also do the things, I see other men doing". These lines appear in the novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. In *Journey to Ithaca* Sophie feels that all journeys to India mean frustration and disappointment.

Thus, Anita Desai has handled the theme of marital dissonance artistically and the language and style she has used in her novels are marked by simplicity, lucidity and are suitable to produce desired effects.

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