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## Psychological Analysis of Female Characters from Selected Novels of Anita Desai

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### ABSTRACT

*The focus of my thesis is to explore the Indian women's experiences in the three novels of Anita Desai, Fire on the Mountain, Clear Light of Day and Fasting, Feasting. Based on the investigation of women's experiences in the two major spheres that are the private or domestic and the public sphere, examine how their spatial existence and movement are constrained by the patriarchal ideologies enforced by men in the community. Also investigate the interaction between oppression, suppression, and self-determination experienced by women in both the domestic and public spheres.*

*As India is still governed by traditional values, women find it difficult to escape from their gendered roles as mother, daughter, and wife. If any attempts are made by them to transgress into the public sphere and to seek equal status with men, they have to face isolation or self-destruction. Here, in the novels, we see women's marginalization through the use of third person narration, the female characters' accounts of their past memories and the use of narrative voices of the female characters. What I will like to argue is that though attempts have been made by women to escape from the patriarchal society, they cannot achieve total independence and liberation. Personal adjustments have to be made by women to connect themselves to the community so as to avoid being isolated and estranged.*

**Keywords:** *Fasting, Feasting.*

### INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai (1937) is now one of the most recognized major figures in Indo-Anglian fiction. She is one of those who has tried to understand closely the predicament of women. During the last three decades, her novels and short stories have won her detractors and defenders and a growing number of readers in India and abroad. The aim of my work is to examine the emergence of feminine sensibility as a concept of reality in the fictional world of Anita Desai. Although there are several Indian women writer's writing in English, I have chosen Anita Desai because, unlike other writer's, she has laid emphasis not only on women character's but on men also. The Psycho Analytical Method which is interesting study can be done with her writings. We can examine how complex a human mind is and how different her characters react to the same situation.

Desai now ranks with celebrated writers e.g. **R.K. Narayana, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand** and **Kamala Markandaya** and, has like them, made a significant contribution to Indo-Anglian fiction. She is one of the most distinguished women novelists writing in English language and comparable on the world-scene, with women writers, like **Irish Murdoch, Doris Lessing Margaret Laurence** and **Elora Nwapa**. In the Times Literary Supplement an enthusiastic perceptive review of her book, *Games a Twilight* (1978) declares, ". . . she writes extraordinary delicate, lucid English which puts many English authors to Shame." She has been awarded the prestigious *Sahitya Academy Award* for her novel, *Fire on the Mountain* and *Author's Build Award* for *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

### State of women writings in English

Women writers have made a considerable contribution to the development of English fiction. In the case of Indian English fiction, however, it is after the Second World War that women writers have enriched the genre, making it compatible in the context of the world literature. Indian women novelists in English, notably **Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai** have offered

convincing creations of the world in which characters live and indicate that the novels written by women novelists have reached maturity. They forge a style of their own, and reveal a power of artistic selection by which their novels achieve a harmonious effect. These writers particularly share the experience of women in general and transmute these experiences into the form of fiction.

As **Prof. Malashri Lal** rightly said: *Indian women writers have consistently refused to be named in the category of feminist writers. These writers question the universal presumption of the western discourses on the basis that the West is unaware of the Indian traditions and problems of joint family, dowry, illiteracy, purdah, sati, and childlessness.* They aspire to pin point these problems and convey them to critics so that ordinary Indian women can carry out a movement and try to find out a solution.

### **Desai a specialist in treating her characters psychologically**

**A.N. Dwivedi** has rightly argued: *Anita Desai is the first among Indian English novelists to have forcefully expressed the existential problems of womankind; she is the first to have laid bare the inner recesses of the human psyche; she is the first to introduce the deep psychological probing of her characters.*

Anita Desai moves inward in her subtle psychological probing and grapples with the abnormal or the hyper-sensitive to lend a dimension of psychological depth and a poetic parable of consciousness to the Indian novel in English. Her work projects the difficulties faced by her characters in shedding their fears and insecurities, which results in disruption of their family ties.

Anita Desai herself describes her creative writings as "*purely subjective*" thus avoiding those problems, which a more objective writer has to deal with since she depends on observation rather than on the private vision, which she tries to encapsulate in her works to see what the subconscious does to an impressionable person. She is more interested in portraying the response of a sensitive mind in the enveloping world. **K. R Srinivasa Iyengar** calls her novels: *The intolerable grapple with thoughts, feelings, and emotions.*

The fictional world of Anita Desai is located in the corridors of the human consciousness. She is almost obsessively concerned with the dark uncannily oppressive inner world of her intensely introvert characters. Her characters, especially the females, have been portrayed on the verge of a psychological breakdown. With a view to capturing the prismatic quality of life in her fiction, she uses the stream of consciousness technique, flashbacks, and interior monologues. These techniques are appropriately used in capturing authentically a psychological realm, an intensified impression, and a quickened multiplied consciousness.

The center of her fictional construction becomes some dominant consciousness artistically realized. For this, she has often been called as Virginia Woolf among the Indian fiction writers. She plunges deep into the psyche of her characters and exploits the underlying truth. She discovers underlines and conveys the true significance of things.

Though very reticent about her personal world, Anita Desai has extensively elaborated her views on creativity. She claims not to have any set theories of the novels. She feels that a writer does not create a novel by observing a given set of theories, he follows flashes of vision and a kind of trained instinct that leads him, not any theories. She feels that writing is not an act of deliberation, vision or choice but a matter of instinct, silence, compulsion and waiting. As an artist, she handles the raw material of life and conveys it through a pattern and a design. She is much interested in life with its hopes, frustrations, negations, rejections and chaotic flow of events as she is concerned with the art of giving shape, purpose, and wholeness to life.

Mrs. Desai elaborates her protagonists in **an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia**

*I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made a stand against the general current, it makes no demands it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out 'the great No' who fight the current and struggle against it, know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.*

### **Desai's aims through these characters**

Anita Desai's characters reveal her vision of life. They share her perception and they set out in quest of meaning. She is often seen as an experimenter who deals with many existentialistic problems and predicaments. Primarily interested in exploring the psychic depth of her female characters, Anita Desai may be said to be doing something unique among the contemporary Indian English fiction writers. Her novels, apart from focusing on the intricacies and complexities of human relationships, inevitably move around the theme of alienation and isolation.

According to **Usha Bande**, her characters can be classified into two distinctive groups:

Those who fail to adjust the harsh realities of life and those who compromise. The premise, which provides the momentum to her creative activity, is the basic human condition. In a novel, as in life, there are those who always remain, outsiders, because they cannot accommodate themselves to the world of realities.

The psychological novels of Desai retain the fundamentals of Indian sensibility and socio-cultural ethos. She focused her attention on the status of women in India in the male-oriented and male-defined social and moral codes. She portrays their quest of self-assertion and self-actualization in the face of rigid norms of behavior in a conformist and status-quo society.

Though Anita Desai traverses a broad territory of themes, yet she mainly touches:

*The physical and psychological life of her characters in general and the protagonists in particular mirrors the multidimensional reality in all its contours.*

She is interested in characters that are not average but are driven into despair and as a result turned into the general environment and trend. She believes that a writer must have certain traits of the head and heart, which are essential for writing a novel. Besides being a creative genius, a novelist must be sensitive and have a power of keen observation so that he can give an actual description and pick up the tiny details.

In an interview with **Jasbir Jain**, she says

*I think a writer simply has to be an observant person. If he is not going to write a novel anyway, which entails so much acute description and also an eye for details. I find certain people tend to take in abstract ideas; others might take in some other aspect of the society they live in. A writer generally tends to pick up the tiny details that other might not notice.*

#### **Desai visualizes the life of common women of India**

Anita Desai lays special stress on the existential problems of womankind in general and Indian women in particular. Although she does not belong to any feminist movement yet there is a touch of persuasive feminism in her writings. She marks a revolutionary departure without involving herself in any controversy and is contended to have women protagonists in her novels. She visualizes life for a woman as a series of obligations and commitments. Her themes and characters depict the existential reality and evoke the sensibility of her females. She is constantly concerned with the problems of communication between men and women and has a talent of probing the psyche of her women characters.

She depicts the inner world of sensibility and the chaos inside the mind of characters with a special stress on the female psyche. The psychological turmoil creates psychic imbalances, which in turn, handicap them in establishing harmonious and gratifying interpersonal relationships. The protagonists possess a defiant individuality and fight against the common place conformity and stick to their own vision of life.

Despite a variety of themes in her novels, the problems of relationships remain essentially central, and all the themes and issues finally get subsumed in this problem. The most recurrent themes are the problems of communication between husband and wife, between the individual and the social world. Alienation in filial relation is a newly emerging idea of our modern society for parents and children are equally alienated from each other. In fact, their meetings have just become Sunday rituals.

While discussing their relationship **Jasbir Jain** has rightly said

Desai prefers to delve deeper and deeper in a character, a situation, or a scene rather than going around about it. She is an expert at depicting female psyche and holds an enviable position as a psychological novelist dealing with the psychic problems of women, particularly Indian ones. Our male-dominated society has idealized her pride in suffering from her Sati-Savitri images.

Anita Desai has emerged with a new awareness dealing the subject with her fine feminine sensibility. Her female characters are educated, well to do and hypersensitive women who are burdened by the contemporary chaotic milieu. Anita Desai reflects the inner struggle of such women, their desire to break the shackles and come out of the shell of their cocoon existence and assert themselves as human beings. In this struggle, they often get alienated from the mainstream of life.

When her characters come out of their cocooned existence and face the harsh realities of the life outside, they feel frustrated and the cruel urban surroundings, in addition to the lack of sympathy and understanding on the part of their near and dear ones only serve to enhance their isolation. Loneliness renders them helpless, torn and indecisive personalities, who research for love and are unable to get it.

As **R.K. Gupta** has commented

*Desai's female characters are generally neurotic, highly sensitive but alienated in a world of dream and fantasy. They are separated from their surroundings as an outcome of their failure or unwillingness to adjust to the reality.*

As a psychological novelist, she tries to delve deep into the emotional build up and crevices of her characters. She employs all techniques of a psychological novel like flashbacks, a stream of consciousness, diary-entries, self-analysis, and ruminations.

She herself confesses about her novels: *My novels are not reflections of an Indian society, politics or characters. They are part of my private effort to seize upon the raw material of life-its shapelessness, it's meaningless . . . despair and to mould it.*

Although Anita Desai cannot be directly related to any feminist movement to secure the complete equality of women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights, moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal and economic, yet she is well aware of the fact that, for Indian women, hearth and heart are two extremes and now they have to strive against their circumstances to break apart from the cordon of customs and redefine themselves. The Rig Veda labeled women as the eternal temptress's driving males to the pleasures of the materialistic world. The religious support given to the evils of 'sati', 'purdah', 'devadasini', and 'polygamy' took the enslavement of women a step further.

### Desai's Novels with novelty in female characterization

The experiences three women's in the novel, *Fire on the Mountain*. The novel focuses on the experiences of the main protagonist, Nanda Kaul, in her self-chosen home of escape in Carignano. With the arrival of her great granddaughter, and her friend, Ila Das, she is again tormented by the past memories of her life in her marital home. The oppression and suppression of feelings are extents in her marital life. The other two female characters are Raka and Ila Das.

As compared to all female characters in the novel, Raka appears to be the one who achieves the greatest degree of physical liberation right at Carignano. However, despite her apparent physical liberation, she is, like Nanda Kaul, tormented by the past memories of the relationship between her parents. The third character to be examined is Ila Das, who is the character experiencing the most disastrous outcome of her trespass into the public sphere. Also look into the emotional complexities that confinement in one sphere of existence brings to the women characters in the novel and see if there exist any similarities in their experiences in society.

Bim's and Tara's experiences are investigated in the novel *Clear Light of Day*. The two female characters receive the same degree of oppression in the society and question is whether the characters have made the same attempts like those female characters in *Fire on the Mountain* to escape from oppression. If Bim and Tara can achieve more self-determination in the patriarchal society, they can reach '*The Clear Light of Day*' at the end of the novel.

The state of oppression, suppression, and self-determination of Uma, Aruna and Anamika is focused in *Fasting, Feasting*. Here, the sources of the three daughters' conditions of oppression, which twosome extent differ from the kind of oppression received by women in the two previous novels. One side many attempts have been made by the women to achieve liberation from one sphere, we will then see the extent that she is portrayed as being satisfied with her present condition or her new way of life.

### CONCLUSION

As a person of South Asian background, I have chosen to work on the novels written by an Indian writer to analyze how the effects of the traditional value system affect the individual lives of Indian women in the late twentieth century as reflected in the novels. It will be interesting to see if any progress has been made in society to improve women's living condition and if they are granted more right to determine their own lives and spatial existence after about 50 years of independence of India. Studying the lives of women depicted in the novels helps us, to some extent, to understand how different cultural, historical and traditional value systems affect women's lives in different times and contexts. The regulations imposed on women are not determined by them, and women, all around the world will look forward to the day when such regulations can be lifted and women can have better access to how they wish to live their lives.

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