

A STUDY OF THEMATIC VISION IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

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Abstract

Anita Desai has become a prominent figure in the galaxy of Indian English women novelists. The novelist has given new dimensions to the literary world of society by delineating the inner beauty of her characters and by unraveling the imbroglio in which they are caught. 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. The society of our time suffers a lot due to dislocation which Desai has penned in most of her works with consummate skill. 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, acculturation, chauvinist, expatriate, insensitive

Anita Desai in the history of Indian Writing in English has become a prominent figure not because of any inventions in style or technique or treatment of extremely unusual themes but because of the portrayal of the pathetic condition of the highly sensitive woman in the insensitive world of callous people. As a shining star in the galaxy of Indian English novelists she has given new dimensions to the literary world of society by delineating the inner beauty of her characters and by unraveling the imbroglio in which they are caught. She is ever one step ahead in her attempt to find out the real meaning of life. In pursuit of it she makes her characters her mouthpiece. Hence each work of hers is an accelerating exploration of the psychic self.

Literature deals with the most enduring memories. And so Anita Desai in her treasure of creation has created the most immortal and true sensitive characters by showing her chief concerns in their obsessions, eccentricities, tremors and traumas, the enduring human condition and the emotional life of women characters who have come from an urban milieu. 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*.¹

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

society of our time suffers a lot due to dislocation which Desai has penned in most of her works with consummate skill. Alienation is not something different, but it is one of the unique characteristics of the era. Now-a-days most of the people feel alone, unrelated to others and are unable to share their feelings. These problem form the backbone of Anita Desai's themes in her novels: "Moral values of women are conveniently altered to suit the demands of men who treat them as their 'objects', 'possession' to be ruled and controlled by psychological insecurity nurtured in them through myths, customs and societal discourse".²

A trendsetting novel known as *Cry, the Peacock*³ is Desai's maiden novel that deals with the mental rather than physical aspect of its characters. It describes about a mismatch marriage of its protagonist, Maya. It is "a disturbing novel, mostly takes the form of interior monologue, delineating the tragic mental breakdown of a young Indian woman, Maya."⁴ She is married to Gautama who shows no love to her wife and remains insensitive to her. He is a rational advocate with whom Maya is unable to cope all her life. The alienation between Maya and Gautama is because of Maya's intense involvement in her own inner world of illusion. She is deeply attached to past, lives almost in world of memories while Gautama values the importance of action because of his rational nature.

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. Both are the chief exponents who reveal this problem with emphasis and poignancy all-around them. The title of this novel sensitively relates the spiritual pangs of Maya, the half-child, half-woman romantic heroine, who identifies herself with the peacock in the agony of ecstasy of their fatal love experience: "Now that I understand their call, I wept for them, and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine"(97). Their marriage is more or less a marriage of traditional bond or a marriage of convenience.

The forces of evil and superstition, the sinister appeal of music and dance, her husband's indifference and detachment create her a 'sinister future'. The death motif is built skillfully into the theme of the novel. Toto's death fills Maya's mind with a premonition of some impending tragedy as she says: "... it was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced, and filled me with this despair." (8)

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 introversion in Indian fiction. It points to a line of significant development - exploration, not of the 'social' man, but 'the lone individual.'"⁵ Hence the novel is a powerful study of the experiences of a highly disturbed mind.

*Voices in the City*⁶ is an existentialist novel. Anita Desai calls it "the terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence."⁷ Nirode, Monisha and Amla - all come from an upper class society. Nirode has no financial problems or burdens. So is Amla, while Monisha is married to Jiban, a man of well- to-do family. What perturbs them is their dislike for Calcutta, the dirty city. The sordidness, the brutality and the sheer dreariness of the physical world are the unwanted thinks. Desai's characters of this novel rebel against the dirty or ugly physical reality which is also hidden in materialism. It never appeals to their sensitivity. To say Calcutta plays an important role as dirty character against which these voices are raised. Nirode like Monisha feels the pressure of this great city. "There is no escape from it" (117). Amla's reaction is similar when she asks Nirode, "this city, this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn't

it? (153) To Nirode, Monisha and Amla, the city is “a black, dead devil” (110), “a poisoned city” and the like.

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.”⁸

Anita Desai in *Bye – Bye, Blackbird*⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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. Adit, comfortably employed in London, married Sarah for something oriental in her attracts him. At the initial stages of his immigration, Adit feels what every other new immigrant feels, to say, admiration and satisfaction. He has become a “spineless imperialist lover”(19) that when Dev visits England to pursue higher studies he is shocked to find Adit swallowing ungrudgingly the humiliations thrown at him by the erstwhile masters. Adit tells Dev that he hardly notices the drawbacks of England and considers himself an admirer of its golden beauty. “I like the freedom a man has here: Economic freedom! Social freedom!”(18)

Even the self-satisfied expatriate gradually finds himself estranged from the new environment. Adaptation to alien culture becomes difficult because the value systems are often different. Adit despite his attempts at acculturation realizes slowly that he is still a misfit. The truth that he is an Indian and can never breathe the English air freely dawns on him. Marriage does not guarantee him equal status. Adit realizes this only when Sarah shuts him out “with a bang and a snap, from her childhood of one-eared pandas and large jigsaw puzzles” (176). The immigrant at such moments often retreats to his own culture and past in search of his lost identity.

Through Dev, Desai captures the psychic journey of an Indian immigrant. Dev “can never bear to be the unwanted immigrant (86) but he is finally drawn into the magic of the land which had enchanted Adit. Not only Adit and Dev but Sarah also loses her identity in her native soil. Sarah gets herself alienated from her society through her marriage, “she had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity” (31). The resultant tension, anguish and a sense of guilt withdraw her from her English society. Emptiness and dissatisfaction haunt her. Her final decision to follow Adit to India is only a relief to her because in her homeland she considers herself not as a person but as roles – ‘Mrs. Sen’ and ‘Sarah’ and “when she was not playing them, she was nobody” (35). At least in India, she hopes, she will have only one face – Adit’s wife. She has sacrificed her to gain a new life. Thus the novel captures the psychological problems of alienated individuals caught in the mesh of biculturalism or multiculturalism. *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, to Anita Desai, “ is the closest of all my books to actuality – practically everything in its drawn directly from my experience of living with Indian immigrants in London,”¹¹ and she writes that “of all my novels it is most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation.”

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*¹² is Desai’s fourth novel which depicts the inner-outer world of its protagonist Sita and her fatigue for life. The novel tells the story of the middle-aged Sita, who is fed up with the mundane routine of a meaningless existence. She feels suffocated in her well-ordered, posh flat in Bombay and struggles hard to break away from it all. She wants to go back to the island Manori where she had spent many golden days of childhood

with her family to seek peace, pleasure and a great pause in her life. This novel is shorter in size but deeper in meaning.

Sita is certainly not an average woman. She has begun to think of the meaninglessness of life. She has confronted the seamy side of life. She does not share her husband's acceptance of life's ordinariness. All friends, acquaintances, relatives and business associates of her husband are for her no better than animals, "nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter" (31-32). She calls them "animals" who are neither pet, nor wild beasts but "pariahs... hanging about drains and dustbins, waiting to pounce and bill and eat." (32)

When Sita escapes to the island in order to "stay whole", "to maintain her freedom", and "to keep the child unborn", Raman interprets "her escape" as "desertion". She does not accept Raman's plea and is pained much over his opinion for her. She says:

"No, no, - dissertations, that's cowardly. I wasn't doing anything cowardly", she begged him to see, with a turbulence of pride. "I was saying No, but positively, positively, saying No. There must be some who say No, Raman! ...Perhaps I never ran away at all. Perhaps I am only like the jellyfish washed up by the waves, stranded there on the sand- bar. I was just stranded here by the sea, that's all. I hadn't much to do with it at all." (108)

Raman listens to her carefully and ridiculously saying:

"So you're no more than a jellyfish," he said bitterly. "You call yourself a helpless jellyfish. Yet see what you have done to yourself, to all of us." "All of you", She vaguely asked. "But you have nothing to do with it. Nothing. There's just the sea- it drowns us or strands us on the sand- bar and there's the island. That's all. (108)

Raman's retort makes her helpless and she starts feeling bad about her doings. Here, she becomes "inauthentic" and "object- like". At last, she comes to realize her mistakes. So, when Raman prepares to leave for the mainland she mends her ways and follows the footprints of Raman that he had laid out for her. This gesture of Sita reveals her existential predicament, of the values of society around her and her return to conformity. As N.R. Gopal rightly points out that, "the novel ends establishing victory of reason over fantasy."¹³

With the publication of *Fire on the Mountain*¹⁴ (1977) Anita Desai has registered herself as one of the best Indo-Anglian novelists. For this novel she has been awarded the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize and the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award. It symbolizes fire which burns in the heart of an old lady, a great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul, and her emotional world is the theme of the novel. At the end of the novel Raka says to her Nani, Nanda Kaul: "Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani – look – the forest is on fire" (145). R.K. Gupta rightly quotes R.S. Sharma's words that "the words are expressive of Raka's resolve to destroy a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural."¹⁵

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" (17). In describing the central theme of the novel, the flash-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. Even as a child she loves privacy and seclusion.

The life long unfaithfulness of Mr. Kaul to Nanda and the hypocritical situation forces her to accept this alienation. Ila Das is another intruder in the novel at Carignano. Nanda Kaul's family and Ila Das's family have close relation even before they come to review it in Kasauli. 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. While Ila is being raped in the village, Raka is busy setting the forest on fire. Ila's stimulating talk destroys the illusory world of Nanda and stimulates Raka to set everything on fire. Thus the novel presents an unconscious revenge and violence in her thoughts. To Ujwala Patil, "Nanda suffers from the psychological shock of rape and feels like Ila Das, that her womanhood too is defiled and selfhood insulted"¹⁶ She further writes: "Ila's rape enhances Nanda's sense of guilt as Nanda could have helped Ila but did not. The shocking realization that she had become a party to the oppression of woman by her indifference and selfishness overwhelm her and Nanda dies under the weight of her guilt" (67).

Thus, *Fire on the Mountain* presents the Desai's tragic view of life, in which innocents are bound to suffer and pay a heavy penny for this. The fire on the mountain becomes the emblem of destruction and purgation, the destruction of an unkind world of many Nanda Kauls and Ila Dases, of an unequal situation in which woman suffer from the slings of misfortune, social inequities and injustices committed on them by a cruel man - dominated society. The title of the novel is emblematic of the revolt of the new generation of women against the male chauvinistic society.

*Clear Light of Day*¹⁷ (1980) tells the story of an anglicized upper middle class Indian family from the 1940s to the 1970s. The protagonist Bim Das is the unmarried elder sister who as a young woman at the time of Partition must take the place of her dead parents as guardian of the siblings and custodian of the crumbling family home in Delhi. Forced spinsterhood is nothing new to our society. What is to be noted is the process of introspection on Bim's part, her analysis of her role, her efforts to attune herself to her younger sister Tara, and her partial success.

The novel begins with Tara and Bakul's visit to Bim at her parent's home in old Delhi after many years. Bim lives with her youngest and mentally retarded brother Baba in the crumbling old house. Tara sees no change in the house. The Difference is made by her. Bim (Bimla) teaches history in a college, leads an ascetic life, the only luxury she affords is to buy books. What experiences is that in spite of her immolation for the family every one is busy in his or her family. "This way she explores her solace and refuge to buy books and reading of them." Music also serves as the best way of living. To Dr. Biswas "Music is one of the greatest joys we can have on earth. If one has that pleasure, then one can bear almost anything in life"⁽⁷⁰⁾. He considers music as his means of survival. In the last words of Aurangzeb Bim gets the impulse for selflessness a move towards others. Thus, this novel is another artistic triumph in the fictional world of Anita Desai.

Desai in her novels has concentrated more on characters rather than social milieu. But *In Custody*¹⁸ we find neither a sensitive and highly – strung woman protagonist nor any violent neurotic woman. Here Desai introduces a change. As Meenakshi Mukherjee marks that, "change is towards a widening of human concerns and a willingness to integrate concrete historical and specific cultural dimensions in the creation of interior landscape"¹⁹. The novel deals with an ineffectual but well-meaning young man whose problems are not just personal and private but public and social.

The story of the novel unfolds a credulous and worldly Deven Sharma who is swayed by an idea of creating a work of his lifetime, but is unfortunately defeated by his own helplessness.

A temporary lecturer in Hindi in a private college in Mirpore a suburb of Delhi, Deven is interested in Urdu literature. As the novel opens, his friend Murad, editor of the Urdu magazine 'Awaz' requests Deven to interview Nur Shahjehanbadi a great Urdu poet, for a special number of his forthcoming issue. The rest of the narrative shifts between Deven's success and failure, his enthusiasm and hesitation, and the final disaster he lands into. Various forces work to help and deter him, till finally he stands at a cross road, not knowing where to turn to. In the end he finds strength in his inner self and resolves to face life as it comes to him.

The title highlights the central vision of the novel is that in taking somebody into custody, one has also to surrender oneself to the other's custody. What happens on one hand is that it is Deven who deserts the poet, while on the other it is the poet, Nur, who deserts Deven.

Art is not separable from life. To Imtiaz Begum, Nur's wife, art is a means of earning money and livelihood whereas to Nur and Deven art means "total, selfless dedication." Jasbir Jain shows her respect to the art and remarks, "art could be responded to, understood, absorbed, identified with, but mystery it would still remain."²⁰ Thus Deven's vision and attempt to tape Nur's poem and voice fails because of getting deceived in purchasing a defective second hand tape-recorder. His failure leads to realize that is "indicative of his growth as a human being."²¹ He prepares himself to annihilate all the troubles and problems which may come to obtain Nur's poems. It shows his movement towards the glow of light of the day "stopping only to pull a branch of thorns from under his foot" (204).

*Baumgartner's Bombay*²² deals with the modern phenomenon of immigrated persons. This novel is a moving account of a homeless, nation less man. He has nowhere to go to regain his lost identity. More poignant than the other novels, it narrates the story of Hugo from his affluent childhood days in Germany to the horror of his murder in India by another German. The series of calamities – losing his home, business and finally his mother makes him mute and accepting. "Defeat was heaped on him whether he deserved it or not" (135).

Social acceptance is factor which creates in man a sense of identity. When the new milieu fails to recognize him as an individual he becomes deindividualized. Cultural uprooting, geographical displacement and failure to connect torment his psyche. Language becomes a major hindrance for establishing contact in India. Identity is a state of mind that is granted by our interaction with the fellow beings in the society and also by our acceptance in the society. But "accepting – but not accepted; that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been dark - his darkness had marked him the Jew, *der Jude*. In India he was fair and that marked him the *firanghi*. In both lands the unacceptable" (20). Thus, Baumgartner's story is one of inherent alienation augmented by global war, colonial war and religious war. When the familiar emotional and geographical worlds are destroyed one gets deidentified.

Anita Desai is a trend setting novelist but her *Journey to Ithaca*²³ (1995) is different novel from the point of her structural and visionary perspectives. The novel is about a quest of divine light. It shows her considerable development from a mankind to a divine writer. Matteo, the hero and Sophie, the heroine come India in search of divine light. Matteo moves after spiritual love and Sophie suffers after getting Matteo's love. They face a lot of unpleasant contest due to their intentions. The story of Laila by Sophie fascinates us how she becomes Mother at ashram in the Himalayas.

In order to enrich the thematic aspect of the novel, Desai raises mystery and suspense. "I have always waited for signs" (31). These words of Matteo indicate that "He will take the path of joy rather than pleasure" (32). "O where is my Lord whose calm face shines only with the pure light of truth?"(275) This question leads to the quest which form the central theme of the novel.

Laila, the Mother, wants spiritual perfection: “Am I to perish in the darkness? Why this punishment, Lord? (280) The significant aspect of theme of spirituality is pullulating through the persistent divine passion of Matteo causing him illusion and vision. He says that “the divine manifests itself in everything, every body” (69).

Thus in this novel, the novelist has united varied groups of people from different parts of world for presenting cosmic vision of human life. The novel transcends the barriers of caste and creed. The incomplete journey of Hugo in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* for his spiritual quest comes to its completion in *Journey of Ithaca*.

The Village by the Sea,²⁴ subtitled *An Indian Family Story* depicts the rustic status of a family. *The Sunday Times* termed it a family tale limpid in style, piercing in feeling, veracious in detail. The novel portrays the story of Lila and her brother Hari who are bolding struggling at their tender age. Her father is a drunkard and her mother is ill. To meet out the expenses of the house Hari decides to earn money and becomes a boy servant at a restaurant in Bombay and learns repairing watches. He comes back home and opens a shop of watch repairing. In the meanwhile Lila changes the ill habits of her father. 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.

In *Fasting, Feasting*²⁵ (1999) Desai presents the story of a small family in which Mama – Papa are the central figures around which their three children revolve unraveling the story of a family that exists in the society like thousands of such families with hope and fear, happiness and sorrow, gain and loss, which are integral parts of life on this earth. At the very outset of the novel Desai presents the contrast that exists between the protagonist, Uma’s own dull and deary existence and her parents’ colourful, happy life.

Even educated parents are not fair in showing their affection for girls. At the birth of a son their joys have no boundary. Such happens at the time of Arun’s birth:

Papa, in his elation leaping over three chairs in the hall, one after the other, like a boy playing leap- frog, his arms flung up in the air and his hair flying. ‘A boy!’ he screamed a bo-oy! Arun, Arun at last! (17)

Woman is an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge. MamaPapa turns deaf ears to the needs of their daughter, Uma considering her only a body, not a soul.

Unlike her other novels it may be observed that here Desai has attempted to present Uma as a woman who has to live in the society accepting all the humiliations, injustices, sufferings and miseries without raising any voice or making resistance. Thus the central meaning of the novel lies in the character of Uma, the woman who becomes the prototype of Sita and Draupadi in their sufferings which they had undergone willy-nilly like the traditional Indian woman, Uma suffers quietly only to prove her great sense of endurance and stoic acceptance. It may be concluded here that *Fasting, Feasting* appears to deviate from all the earlier novels for it does not deal with the exclusively female dominate of plots. In the mid – 1980s she appears to shift to male-centred plots like *Baumgartner’s Bombay*.

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. She has not only shown her concern with the fate of the married woman in Indian society today but has handled also the issues of violence against women artistically and veraciously. 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. It is not only the male - chauvinist that has acted as the antagonist force but also apathetic female has done more harm in terms of the loss of woman soul. In this way Anita Desai has presented the unhappy situations of women in Indian society in all her novels.

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