

## THE EFFECT OF INDIANNESS ON WOMEN

**T. Pushpanathan**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
SCSVMV University,  
Kanchipuram – 631 561,  
Tamilnadu

Anita Desai is one of the most distinguished among the younger set of Indo-English writers. Her novels are essentially Indian because they draw their nourishment from the contemporary urban Indian background. The emotional upheavals of the educated Indians are the raw material from which her novels are textured. We can see a vivid picture of Indian systems that reflect the lives of our women, in this paper.

She is one of the best known and highly regarded novelists working in English in the sub-continent. Anita Desai strikes us as one of the most intellectual Indo-Anglican novelists of our generation. Quite unassuming and of a reserved disposition, she's one of the creative writers of modern Indo-Anglican life and novel in all its complicated aspects. She has carved a special niche for herself in the Indo-Anglican novels because, with her, comes a distinctive change in the content and purpose of the social move.

The influence is clear in the structure, themes and techniques of her novels. Her novels are essentially Indian because they draw their nourishment from the contemporary urban Indian background. The emotional upheavals of the educated Indians are the raw material from which her novels are textured.

In *Where Shall We Go this Summer*, Sita's faith in miracles is an Indian faith. Indians have not lost their moorings. The old values have not yet disappeared. A number of beliefs, customs and traditions continue to hold sway in spite of modernization. Sita's belief in miracles is conspicuous. It also depicts the plight of the female psyche in Indian society. "Wasn't this Manori, the island of miracles? Her father had made it an island of magic once, worked miracle of a kind – he might work another miracle, posthumously". (*Where Shall We go this Summer*, 28)

Sita vibrates and throbs against the almost sub human placidity, calmness and sluggishness. Therefore, Sita feels that marriage, and all human relationships are a farce. Things go worse with many Indian women, because, to add to all this, their husbands look at them with a peculiar expression that is cool, curious and uncomprehending.

'Other people put up with it - its not so, so insufferable', he said. 'Why can't you? Perhaps one should be grateful if life is only a matter of disappointment, not disaster'. (*Where Shall We go this Summer*, 130)

Men like Raman are intelligent, respectable but indifferent to their wives' feelings. They take nothing seriously except their business and therefore wreck their marriages. So for her women characters, all relationships are doomed and end in failure and frustration. This is true in India. This shows Anita Desai's knowledge of Indian conditions, beliefs and values.

Sita's obsession for her father and the island is also an Indian condition. Whereas in the west, people don't throng too much on their parents when compared to their Asian counterparts' parents in India are looked upon as God like figures.

Also the return of Sita to Bombay too is nothing but purely an Indian predicament. Women in India always take great pride in caring their spouses and rearing their children. Nowhere in this world, we can see this much importance given to marital harmony than in India. For centuries, women are treated as mere organs of lust and childbearing machines. Women have not their own thinking and ideas, whereas they are made to view this world from the eyes of males either it be her father, or her husband and afterwards, her son.

Nowhere in the world, is given much more priority to boys rather than in India are treated as a symbol of pride, a symbol of honour, moreover a symbol of status. This Indian mentality is reflected in her novel *Fasting, Feasting*. Arun stands a symbol of pride, honour and status for Papa Mama, whereas Uma and Aruna are nothing but reared only to get married to someone.

“‘A boy!’ he screamed, ‘a bo-oy’. Arun, Arun at last!” (*Fasting Feasting*, 17). The rituals and customs, which are followed by Mira-Masi, reflect the knowledges of Anita Desai in Indian Traditions and its culture. Mira-Masi's costumes of her widowhood (wearing widow's white garments) described by Anita Desai are another testimony of her Indian spirit. Wearing the white garments in their widowhood is nothing but Indian tradition, which is not followed by any other nation, anywhere in the world.

Ever since her widowhood, she had taken up religion as her vocation. Her day was ruled by ritual, from the moment she woke up to make her salutations to the sun, through her ritual bath and morning prayers, her preparation of her widow's single and vegetarian meal of the day and through the evening ceremonies at the temples she visited. (*Fasting Feasting*, 39)

Though women are brutally handled all over the world, Indian women are the most vulnerable victims of their society. Uma's cousin Anamika who was as lovely, soft, petal-skinned, pink-lipped as a flower, who was too brilliant to win a scholarship to Oxford, where only the most favoured and privileged sons are hoped to go, is an ample victim of Indian society. Her scholarship stood only as a qualification, to search for a husband for her, nothing more. Anamika is forced to marry the much older man than her, so grim-faced and conscious of his own superiority, and is totally impervious to Anamika's beauty and grace and distinction. Anamika's husband is a typical 'Mama's boy' to the extent he could be a silent witness to his mother's beating of his wife regularly. Finally she was made to succumb to death by her in-laws. Anamika is again one more instance of burnt brides of Indian society.

Parents of Indian society are more worried about the evil thoughts of other but not their own children's happiness. Indian women who are either divorced or widowed are disapproved by this society. They are forced to carry on with their marital discorded, life for the sake of their parents, but physically ill-treated and mentally alienated. Uma said, 'I hope they will send her back. Then she will be home with Lila Auntie again, happy', 'you are so silly, Uma,' Mama snapped, "How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?" (*Fasting Feasting*, 71)

Marital discord is a pre-dominant theme in Anita Desai's novels. Arranged marriages in India have a traditional basis. But they need not always be happy. India being a male-dominated society, young girls could be married to grey old men twice their age. But widow remarriages or divorcee's marriages are not approved of Nanda with her vice chancellor husband, Sita with Raman, Uma with Harish are such arranged marriages, even if they dislike. They have no other

way than to accept. Thus infidelity, misunderstanding, lack of communication led to marital discord.

Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, treasured solitude she wanted no one, nothing else, no intrusions or distractions. What pleased and satisfied her was the starkness at carignano. All she wanted was to be alone even in her old age. Her husband had never kept her like a queen. He had done enough only to quiet her, while he carried on a life-long affair with another woman. She lived alone because she was forced to do.

Indianness is clear in the way; she moulds her personality to that of her husband's and also in her silent suffering. So women like her have to bear not only with the indifference of their husbands, but also with their sub-human placidity and insensitivity. Desai's ways of describing the sufferings of Indian woman help the readers be more precise about it. Through Raka, Desai is perhaps trying to show the fate of Indian children who could easily transform into recluses because of an unhappy childhood caused by parental rift. Parents forcing children to adapt anglicized manners, like going to clubs and parties, can result in making children lonely. Raka is a child who finds such painful occasions.

Anita Desai has a passion for language and she uses it efficiently to reflect the Indian character and situation. She succeeds in projecting Indians through their talk. A voice in the market place enables us to picture the person-grain seller – talking to Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*. The talk is a pointer to his manners and class.

'You should not go so late' he said his face was troubled. "It is not good for a memsahib to walk alone in the dark". The word troubled drops a hint of the trouble awaiting Ila Das. This might be inquisitiveness to foreigners. But it is a very natural manner of showing one's consideration for another in India.

Ramlal's speech pattern is typically Indian. Desai captures his Indian tone with great accuracy when he rings out a warning to the langurs thus, "Hroo hroo: get off you she-devil, you churail". Another fine example is his dialogue with Raka. "At night you hear jackals howling and people have seen ghosts", he lowered his voice "The ghosts of people who have died of dog bite and snake bite roam on the hilly side".

Besides throwing light on belief in ghosts, Anita Desai has aptly rendered into English, the Indian fascination. To achieve this Indianness, she makes use of Indian words and expressions. Indian nature is very active in the revelation of Nanda Kaul's loneliness and love for solitude. Anita Desai brings out this atmosphere of loneliness and somberness on the mountaintop through the weather, view, birds, animals, trees and words. The Indian plains are described impressively that one lives in it and becomes one with it.

The beauty of the Indian hills (Kasauli) with the cattle browsing, single lamps here and there and the hidden hamlets is a fine example of how she changes words with colours. "They cascade like pearls from her pen, catching, reflecting the sensuous porous beauty around her" (*Economic Times*, April 29, 1979). The description of the Indian langurs, the paddy fields the Kohl black floating clouds are almost a painter's word picture.

Anita Desai has prescribed the beauty of the Indian hill stations. She has contrasted it with the other disheartening aspects of our social life, which should cause some concern. Though Ila Das' talk and narration of hair-raising stories, the degrading conditions of the Indian poor are made known. No, my dear, a handful of red chilli powder is considered treatment enough, a package of cow dung; oh! Shalln't harrow you with details. (*Fire on the Mountain*, 137)

Winding up the talk before the servants is a memoir of the erstwhile Indian fashionable ladies. Ooh – dear, so it goes, she wound up, silenced by despondency and by Ram Lal's

appearance on the scene. (*Fire on the Mountain*, 130) Indianness is seen in the changed conditions of these favoured families. Nanda Kaul's thoughts help us to understand the character of Ila Das and the faded glory of the British Empire. Their upbringing has made them helpless as Ila Das says:

'Isn't it absurd', she rattled on, 'how helpless our upbringing made us? We thought we were being equipped with the very best - French lessons, piano lessons, British governesses.... Now if I were one of the peasants in my village, I'd manage quite well. Grow a pumpkin vine, keep a goat, pick up kindling in the forest for fire—and perhaps I could cut down those thirty rupees I need to twenty-five, to twenty – but not, I think less.... (*Fire on the Mountain*, 127)

Her novels are contemporary Indian novels because of the timely Indian themes. Modern Indian sophisticated life with the demand of emotional saturation becomes a theme in all her novels. There is no ambiguity in the presentation of Indianness. She uses a style, which reflects the rhythms and sensibilities of the Indian text. Whatever locale she selects, either urban or rural or within households. She captures the atmosphere so well, that she almost makes the readers breathe the odours of the location of hers.

She recreates the atmosphere by describing the vivid landscape, the minute rustling sounds of leaves, sounds of birds and animals, the flora and the fauna, howls and groans of people, sounds of vehicles and so on. Her sentences are beautifully ordered and controlled in their rhythm. The description of hers makes the readers involve in the novel deeply with enthusiasm.

Desai has presented the Indian scene and the Indian spirit with such compelling force that she has attracted more praise in England and America than in India. She says, the scenes and impressions, moods and emotions that made up the world didn't seem to find a final form till I had written them down.

As an Indian woman novelist, she presents the urban panorama of Indian life. She is Indian in her response. Her sensibility is shaped by the Indian environment and climate. It is natural, therefore that her writing is a glow with pure Indianness.

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