

## Treatment of women characters in Anita Desai's voices in the city

Jyoti

Research Scholar, Singhania University, Rajasthan, India

### Abstract

Anita Desai probes into problems of woman, be it of a daughter, sister, mother, grandmother or a wife. Her female figure appears as a victim in a patriarchal, and father dominated Indian family. Anita Desai depicts the Indian woman as a fighter, a victim, a heroine and in later novels ultimately a winner because of her indomitable spirit and attitude of compromise. She has portrayed both kinds of women-those who are symbols of growth and change, those who are powerful means of withdrawal, regression, decay, death and destruction.

**Keywords:** treatment, anita desai's

### Introduction

Anita Desai holds a prestigious position among the Indo-Anglian novelists. Her pre-occupation with the Indian women and their reaction to the changing situation in modern India distinguishes her from the other women writers. Her protagonists, chiefly Indian women, belong to the various age groups and are in constant conflict with the society. Most of these novels focus on women. The protagonists suffer in a meticulous world dominated by men, who in the guise of father, brother or husband present a constant threat to their integrity.

She designs the exploration of the disturbed psyche of the Indian woman lying emphasis on the factor of loneliness and alienation. However, Desai's women do not give up the strife so easily. Desai focuses on the gender roles of women seen through the lenses of female activities experiences goals, values, institutions, relationships and modes of communication. Desai's contribution in the field of feminism does not merely involve revalidating the French theories or the western model. She presents in her writing, the pictures of women in flesh and blood, with a distinct mind of their own. Her characters are no more wooden creatures, subject to suppression and male domination only. The transformative power of Anita Desai's novels lies in her taking up the task of revealing the process of self-awareness at work in feminine psyche.

Men in her novels mostly exist only as projections of women's point of view. She explores the issue of gender from one Indian socio-historical perspective. But where comes the question of labeling as a feminist, like other women authors, Desai too considers the term 'woman writer' as derogatory as it takes away her artistic autonomy and identity and she comes into the category of gender. She expressed her reservations on this issue, in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia: I find it impossible to whip up any interest in a mass of woman marching forward under the banner of feminism.

Most of Desai's women characters registered protest against the circumstances which oppressed them. Yet where Maya, Monisha, Nanda, Anamika and Uma failed to tide over the crisis, Bim, Sita and Sophie succeeded in doing so. Desai's

entire fiction traces the changing image of women in the face of existential dilemmas. These female protagonists assert their right to exist not as shadows of their male counterparts but as independent human beings with a will of their own. In fact this is the real aim of any feminist. Her characters realised that to live life one had to face new challenges, that hatred was of no avail, that all transcending love could overcome all obstacles, that life is indeed one single whole which is a delicate interconnected web. It shows although Desai is not a surrealist yet her understanding of the female psyche is highly distinctive and remarkable. She views the female in relation to different kinds of organization - familial, social national and international.

Feminism is a concept emerging as a protest against male domination and the marginalization of women. The new woman has raised her voice against the atrocity and injustice done to her. The modern woman protests and dares to pronounce her convictions. And it is their voice of protest, their pronouncement in an overtone that has credited the difference and forces us to consider and call Anita Desai as a focused feminist. Desai has presented three kinds of females. In the first group are such females who are hypersensitive and after self-introspection they plunge further into dark dismal depths of neurosis, like Maya. The second group portrays women characters who silently suffer the strain of life and become idealists or commit suicide like Monisha. While the third group discloses women who discern new and important discoveries about themselves resulting in a sobering effect on them and they find a sense of fulfillment in their relation to the world. Even in a male dominated, tradition oriented society such women characters try to establish their own value system and if fail, then their inner potentiality enables them to resist unjust social pressure and they protest...

Anita Desai is one of those great Anglo-Indian novelists who have tried to delve deep into the psychology of women from different angles. She has picked up such female characters, who are hypersensitive, solitary and introspective, withdrawn into a life of seclusion and loneliness, these women have their material needs taken care of by wealth and servants but their emotional needs remain unfulfilled. They are alienated from

society, from world, from parents, families and even from themselves. They are perplexed by the agony of their existence, the metaphysical void and fears. She portrays her protagonists in novels like hypersensitive, Maya, lonely Monisha, bored Sita, discarded Nanda Kaul, peculiar Raka sensitive, imbalanced Bim, lonely Lotte and separated Sophie. Her novel *Voices in the City* is existential in character, for it explores the inward subjectivity of its main characters. As H.M. Williams observes:

It is an 'existential' novel that explores the inner climate of youth despair, epitomized by the over-acutely self-conscious Nirode, that quoter of camus, finding no meaning in his own life or in life at all. This existential 'angst' is duplicated in Monisha in whom it assumes a fatal rhythm from which Nirode was once narrowly saved but which in her reaches its inevitable end...."

Monisha, unable to bear the absurdity of her existence, commits suicide. Her life becomes wretched because she is childless. She always imagines about the child, when she sees Kangaroo lying in sun she thinks. a Kangaroo lies on its back to sun the soft honey fur on its belly, but its pouch alas is empty."(CTP112)

Her estrangement from the family, society and her instinct for existential independence governs her to reject her degraded existence. "Such a life can't be lived... a life dedicated to nothing.... That this husk is protection from death. Ah yes, yes then it is a choice between death and mean existence, and that surely is not a difficult choice" (CTP 122)

Hateful relationship with Jiban and the other family member's default of any creativity degrade her to a depressed condition where life appears, "only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution? Only a conundrum is that, then life?"(CTP 224)

Though, her depressed condition can't be lamed merely to her husband and his family. Unsatisfying childhood relations have disqualified her in developing healthy relations in her adult life. The example of complicated, distressed and untrue relationship given by her parents like a seed destruction and degeneration is shown in her formative years. Her obstructions in this manner destroy her relationship with Jiban J.R. Rees observes:

"Insecurity, frustration, warping of early development is the most important factors in later mental breakdown. The child develops a wrong idea of itself and its relation to society which makes for difficulty in adjustment as it grows up. Its idea of itself will be in conflict with the hard facts of reality."(J.R.Rees 100)

Therefore, her obsessive nature is not by birth but it is created by her circumstances and to realize the reasons of that attitude in the beginning of life. She develops her attitude, which is essential to her.

Monisha has a signified self-identity and taken obsessive pride in realizing herself as unique from other women in her in-law's family. She contemplates desire for alienated and separated behaviour to be the sign of superiority. She selects separation as an approach for survival in the unpleasant atmosphere of Jiban's family: Keep it all to yourself, a secret, quiet, private, all your own to keep and gloat over."(VIC114) The customs of Jiban's family produces an emotional vacuum in her. The retreat into the previous identity again diminishes her already slighter bond with the outer fact.

The conflicts of the married life of Jiban and Monisha and at last, her suicide, are only a deviation of Maya's approach of murder and suicide. Her individuality is victimized by the worst environment of Jiban's family. Her sense of devastation has come by the combination of biological, psychological and social factors. Erich Fromm has rightly remarked:

Whether man's dominant passion is love or whether it is destructiveness depends largely on social circumstances these circumstances, however, operate in reference to man's biologically given existential situation and the needs springing from it and not to an infinitely malleable, undifferentiated psyche as environmentalist theory assume(Erich 26)

Monisha realizes the need of self-protection and familiarity in her existence. Like Maya, she also feels herself superior to other people whom she knows. Therefore, this feeling does not let her interact with other people in a positive reciprocal manner; her desire for undisputed existence compels her to do something rebellious against her surrounding people. Though she finds herself encircled through, obsessive fears and inner unconfirmities, she considers "the whole range of anxiety, self-despair self-condemnation, and self-destructive impulses."(Karen 74)

Her inner violent anger and self-aggressive compulsions bring the tragedy in her life. Her greatest desires and dislikes force her to think, like her brother: "The city was as much atmosphere as odour, as much a haunting ghost of her past as a frenzied passage towards early death."(VIN 42)

The narrative mode is Monisha's diary, which serves her only reliable means of communication in an atmosphere of distrust, envy, ignorance monotonous drudgery and lack of privacy. In addition to the diary Monisha realizes that Nirode is the only familiar creature in her survival. Neither her husband nor her in-laws try to sympathise with Monisha. She alternates between her psyche of hope and fear in the complicated atmosphere of her husband's family. She desires for her mother's love like Maya and wishes her brother's sympathetic companionship. She is so sensitive to the oppressive domestic environment that she thinks:

My black wardrobe, my family, my duties of serving fresh chapatis to the uncles as they eat, of listening to my mother-in-law as she tells me the remarkably many ways of cooking fish, outbeing Jiban's wife. If all this were to blow away, what would be left would be very small too, transparent and vulnerable (VIN 112)

She expresses tension between stillness and movement, between activism and quietism like other survivals. Without any substitute, she considers removal of her struggles through the only way of dissolution. In her efforts for freedom from a trap situation, death is the only resource to get it. Her depression about her relationship makes her alienated from this world. She is victimized by this society which appears aggressive at any place:

I am so tired of this crowd. In Calcutta, it is everywhere. Deceptively, it is quiet crowd-passive, but distressed. Till there is reason for anger and then a sullen yellow flame of bitterness and sarcasm starts up, it is vicious, mordant. (VIN 118)

Destructive notions are not intentional but emotions stem in the entire existence of man. They are some of the ways to make sense of life. Monish decides a destructive and to get her success over her in-laws by overthrowing their demands to

crush her. This is the obsessive way of feeling great. It reflects an unaware passion "to frustrate, outwit or defeat others in personal relations. (Karan 27) These feelings evidently denote Monisha's feeling that how much she is aware of her insuspicious existence. She realizes herself as extremely passive, a mere object and mournfully lacks the sense of her own instinct and identity. She thinks that she needs a sense of being able to do something.

She feels lunatic clasp in herself and then she commits suicide. Her self-injurious tendencies exist in the form of efforts. It is only self-respect, which she wants, to exist, in herself safe. Before committing suicide she confesses. "God, she pain! Here it was, on her eyes, her face it come....there, all over. With her arms she wrestled with it, she fought it, it was not what she wanted....she screamed no!no!no! Screamed, screamed".(VIN 242)

J.A.C. Brown argues that the act of suicide, like obsessive symptom, satisfies both the desire to punish oneself for hating one, who should be loved and the desire to punish the beloved for real or imagined neglect. The meaning of this act is therefore "a specific approach: If you had treated me better I should not have killed myself".(Brown 78)

Monisha resembles that person who remains quiet and reserved in oneself, but violent passion is another powerful part of his personality that can do any-worst deed to protect self-respect. She becomes aggressive and agitated when Jiban asks her about the script of Nirode's play she thinks that he has no right to share her secrets. She clutches away the script, put wondered at this sudden violence in her attitude:

I snatch it away in fury. This violence of action..Where has it sprung from? I thought I had subdued everything inside me laid it dark in a dark and quiet place to sleep. Yet it has leapt out, this violence, and made me snatch the manuscript out of jiban's astonished hands. We stare at each other in equal confusion. It's nothing, just scrubings, I excuse my brother and put it away. The humiliation of touch and communication...I'll save Nirode as much of it as I can, as I save myself from it (VIN 133)

Monisha has some psychological problem. She finds obscurity in her surroundings and does not try to develop optimistic attitude in herself. She enforces the primary truth of her awareness of experience and decisions. She fails to achieve an adequate self-identity, a meaningful existence of life. Her ineffectiveness, in bringing about a compromise between the demands of her physical and psychic needs, brings about fatal results. Such characters engage in "exaggerated self - accusations recrimination and feel severe guilt and self - devaluation, such reactions do protect the individual from expressing dangerous hostility toward other, but may lead to depression and even to an attempted or actual suicide."(Desai 129)

Her inter-personal conflicts and disruptions, connected with marital disputes, result in extreme stress and ultimate self-sacrifice. Monisha's younger sister Amla comes to Calcutta. But soon she realizes that Calcutta is a monstrous city that lived no healthy red blooded life. This city conspires against all citizens who wish to enjoy this city. She also wishes to make her career in art, after being trained she has come to Calcutta from Bombay. She develops a relationship with a portrait painter Dharma a married man. Amla becomes ready to be a model for his painting. She is a lovely girl with transparent glow and beauty who attends parties, dinners and

dances. Infact, outwardly she looks to be cheerful, but inside, she is alienated and depressed like Monisha and Nirode. When she visits her sister Monisha, she finds some changes in her. She thinks the monster city Calcutta "had laid its hands" upon her sister Monisha. She realizes "this monster city that lived no normal, healthy, red blooded life but one that was subterranean, under - Lit, stealthy and odourous of mortality, had captured and enchanted or disenchanted both her sister and brother."(VIN 150)

She observes hypocritical and treacherous way of life and the hollowness of existence. In spite of all the stimulation of new experiences, new existence, new works, new contacts, this sense of hollowness agitates her. She feels much depressed of life in the metropolitan city of Calcutta she repents. "Why ever I come to Calcutta? Why did not I stay away in Bombay or go home to Kalimpong? (VIN 230-31)

Anita Desai has taken the problem of Indian female existence in all her novels. Therefore, a study of her treatment of the identity crisis of female character is central to the correct understanding and appraisal of her writings. She is often seen as a somewhat Western existential experimenter who deals with many existentialistic problems and predicaments. She portrays her characters as individuals, "facing single handed, the ferocious assault of existence". The basic problem for her characters is now to exist in society, and yet maintain their individuality. It is to the credit of Anita Desai that in concentrating on the inner being of woman characters, she has given a new dimension to the Indian English novel. Her works have unconsciously contributed to the feminist use, an expression of inner preoccupations and of the modern ideal of tiding a male-dominance free society.

## References

1. Heinemann FH. Existentialism and The Modern Predicament London: Adoms and Charles Black, 1953.
2. Jain Jasbir. Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai Jaipur: Print Well, 1987.
3. Desai Anita. Voice in the City London: Peter Owen, 1965.
4. Rees JR. The Health of Mind London: Faber and Faber, 1973.
5. Fromm Erich. The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness Englan Penguin, 1972.
6. Horney Karan. Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Self London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965.
7. Brown JAC. The Distress Mind London: C.A. Watts and Company, 1946.
8. Desai Anita. J.C. Abnormal psychology and Modern Life Bombay: D.B. Tarapurwala sons, 1977.
9. Fromm Erich. The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness England: Penguin, 1972.