

The tragic vision of women in conflict with her mind as portrayed in the selected novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract

The essay as an article seeks to explore the portrayal of women protagonist in the fictional world of Anita Desai who are in conflict with their own mind and live in a world of chaos and confusion. The study shows how the protagonists of Anita Desai embark on their voyages and undergo untold sufferings before they can achieve their goal. The article is also an attempt to study the powerful characters in the novels of Anita Desai, who break down under the stress of the misery, but at the same time remain staunch individuals, very much conscious of their independence and find it difficult to accept conventional equations and strike a balance with the people around them. This essay examines the various representations of conflict in the mind of female protagonists portrayed in the five novels of Anita Desai viz. *Cry*, *the Peacock*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Clear Light of Day*, and *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. This paper hopes to create many more interested in the study of the portrayal of women, who are caught in the conflict between illusion and reality, and who also wants to be seen as launching themselves for their identity.

Keywords: indo-anglican novelist, sensibility, provincials, philistines, anarchists, moralists, familial disturbances

Introduction

One of the chief delights of fiction is the satisfaction of our desire to know about man as he is himself, and in relation to his society. A novelist should, therefore, carve man's image in his art with a social awareness and insight into life. The Indo-Anglican novelist generally writes in the classical tradition and seeks to project an integrated view of women's identity, her place in society and the social values, there within which she works out her destiny. In India, Anita Desai was the one novelist who added a new dimension to English fiction by Indian Women Writers by concentrating on the exploration of sensibility, a particular kind of modern Indian sensibility which is ill at ease, among provincials and philistines, the anarchists and a moralists. In the novels of Anita Desai, the focus is on the inner climate, the climate of sensibility. Her main concern is to depict the psychic state of her protagonists, at a crucial juncture of their lives. Anita Desai is an exception, that instead of presenting woman in conflict with the society, she rather wishes to keep her focus on woman in conflict with her mind, her forte is the exploration of the form of cultural polarization, conflict between traditional values and western ideas, but they are organized to highlight the mental development of the characters. She is gifted with a style and a sensibility to suit her aesthetic goal of delineating her central subject of a world weary character fighting and struggling to be free from the nets laid by society, in which she is enmeshed. Among the Indian writers in English she is perhaps the most self-conscious artist "forging a unique world out of things of day-today existence of an Indian female". In an interview, Anita Desai admitted, "Of course I do write of the contemporary scene and therefore the characters must contain the modern sensibility" (Ram, Atma. Interviews with Indian English Writers. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1983, 24-25).

Anita Desai's novels are reflective of social realities, but she does not dwell like Mulk Raj Anand on social issues and rather

delves deep into the forces that condition the growth of a female in the patriarchal, patrilineal, male dominated Indian family. She observes social realities from a psychological perspective, not as a social reformer or moralist. Most of her major characters have a near-neurotic quality about them. Exceptionally gifted, they are constantly disturbed by familial ties that they find uncomfortable and inescapable at the same time and with which they cannot reconcile their individual values.

Maya of *Cry*, *the Peacock* is a highly sensitive woman. Brought up in an illusory world of romantic faith she fails to adjust with her practical and down to earth husband. Nirode, in the novel *Voices in the City* is a rebel, but he fails to keep up the link with his mother and is constantly at loggerheads with himself as he cannot either completely detach himself or establish a satisfactory relationship. In the novel *Clear Light of Day*, Bimis admired for her courage, for her resolve to live without hanging on to someone, yet her bitterness sprouts from the familial disturbances caused by Raja and Tara. Nanda Kaul in the novel *Fire on the Mountain* is an admirable person but in spite of her efficiency and talents, she has led a life of deprivation in the world of her husband and children and retires to Carignano, passionately pledged to a life of loneliness. A common trait in all major characters of Anita Desai is their longing to be free of all kinds of social and familial involvement. They are constantly striving to avoid emotional entanglement and social responsibilities. Bim, however, is an exception: deeply committed to certain responsibilities even while struggling against the consequent psychological strain is her peculiarity.

Anita Desai's protagonists are people born out of loveless marriages, people who try to shun reality and escape into a dream world nurtured by their fantasies, people who break away from what is real and rational and feel terribly alienated. They always evince a tendency to escape and seek shelter in an illusory world of their own creation. According to R.S. Sharma, Maya's neurosis originates to her father and this fixation is later

extended to her image of Gautama. Maya's tragedy lies in the inadequate emotional transference from father to husband, and this blocks her encounter with reality. Gautama himself explains to her the reason of her sorrow:

You have a very obvious father – obsession, which is also the reason why you married me, a man much older than yourself. The realization that another person, both close to you and your father does not place the same trust as you do in the adored figure shakes your faith (*Cry*, 25).

Archetypes by definition is an innate structure in the transpersonal or collective unconscious. In fact archetypes are 'dominants of the collective unconscious' (C. G. Jung, *Approaching the Unconscious* C.G. Jung ed., *Man and his Symbols* (London 1978), 58), which express themselves through the primordial images. Therefore, precisely because it is an archetypal novel, it moves through symbols and the interpretation imperatively demands a very definite exploration of the basic symbols and their progression through the conscious and unconscious of Maya.

Maya views her relationship with her husband Gautama as a relationship with death and she tries to escape. Maya's anguish finds its correlation in the agony of the peacocks, and once she discovers this identity she becomes tragically aware of her own predicament, 'I am dying and yet I am in love with living', she cries out. Her passion is not merely for Gautama the man, he is in fact her point of contact with reality, and his rational world has little room for her fantasy. Maya revolts against this denial of life and thinks of him in terms and an ascetic like Buddha. Maya reads the slokas from the Gita, but her understanding of detachment is different from that of Gautama. They fail to meet on a common ground.

All that I felt now at his surprise was resignation and even relief. It had only underlined an awareness, a half deadness to the living world which helped and strengthened me by justifying my unspoken decision. (*Cry*, 5)

This is the speech of a woman who has come to the crucial decision to murder her husband as she is committed to life, while her husband according to her is indifferent to it. Thus Gautama's murder is not a calculated murder or accident but a result of sudden impulse, Maya feels that she has a right to live as she loves life.

On the other hand in *Fire on the Mountain* we come across the aged Nanda Kaul, in her decrepit summer villa, her abode after the death of her Vice-Chancellor husband. Once an important figure of a society as well as in her vast family. She is one of those intelligent, unsentimental Indian women with a built-in streak of sardonic feminism who do not love their matriarchal role. Whereas she had previously tended to her children with pleasure and pride, entertained her husband's colleagues and students, "looking sharply to see if the furniture, all rosewood, had been polished, and the doors of the gigantic cupboards properly shut" (*Fire*, 26). She now has a different attitude towards her personal environment. The care of others was a habit Nanda has mislaid. It had been "a religious calling she had believed in, still she had found it fake".

The barren rocks and hills of Carignano in *Fire on the Mountain* become the projection the projection of Nanda Kaul's self. She is herself lonely, has kept herself aloof from relatives and the society to spend a life of seclusion in the quiet house of Kasauli. The barren landscape, the lonely pine tree, the rocks and hills of

Carignano do not provide her the absolute tranquility of her dreams.

In Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day*, the female protagonist Bim is free from the traumas of a shattered childhood or an incompatible marriage. She is symbolic of forces that have sustained all the foundation of all family life. She becomes symbolic of the archetypal sustaining mother, a mother, a metaphor that Anita Desai subtly employs to reaffirm and reassert the life-themes in the novel. Bim's revolt against the traditional image of Indian woman is manifested in all that she says or does. Unlike most Indian girls, she opts out of marriage for a life of chosen spinsterhood to pursue a career and a way of life which she accepts gracefully despite its limitations. This decision she takes of her own will. It is quite evident that she is more admired and adored of the two sisters. She had a near sure offer of marriage from Dr. Biswas and continues to draw amorous responses from men around her, including Bakul. She refuses to play the conventional role of a submissive wife and becomes in a sense a truly liberated woman. Unlike Nanda Kaul, Bim achieves her identity and her 'self' not in isolation but in togetherness, not in rejection, but in acceptance, not in withdrawal, but in positive commitment. Her commitment to her role sustains Bim against the onslaughts of time and makes her the sustaining force of the family.

Dieter Riemenschneider argues that, in *Clear light of Day*, history and individuals seem linked by coincidence rather than by the intrinsic logic we encounter in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. (*History and the Individual in Anita Desai's Clear Light of Day and Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, Kirpal, 187-199). This novel of Anita Desai locates Bim's eventual awareness of the interconnectedness of "separate histories" (*Clear*, 182). The musical performance which triggers Bim's epiphany suggests modes of apprehension that are intuitive and emotional. Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day* gestures insistently towards the existence of a "real" world with which it is imperative to connect. In her role as a substitute female and a substitute mother, Bim discovers her own mode of connection

In Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita's desire not to give birth to her fifth child is in itself a transgression of nature. She is afraid of the bloodshed and violence that go with the process of creation. She stands all day on the balcony keeping away the crows that attack a wounded eagle on the rooftop of a neighboring house, "who winced dreadfully every time she heard a child cry" (*Where*, 16). In that city of flats and "alleys" crows form a shadow civilization. The crows hop clownishly about the rock, on which the sea breaks "scrambling to catch a rotten fish or scraps of edible flotsam left by the waves to stink in the sun" (*Where*, 38). They whistle in ecstasy and wave their wings as they find a wounded baby eagle. They laugh and rasp as they whip it with their "bluebottle wings" and tear into it with their "scimitar beaks". The eagle tries to crawl into the shelter of the wall's shadow and its "leaf red" wings scrape the concrete and then its "Gold-beaked" head falls to one side. Sita shouts for a stick and stones. But the crows are indifferent. They are used to certain amount of opposition and aggression from the human population of the city, "they could tackle it, ignore it, choking with laughter" (*Where*, 39).

Sita watches disbelievingly at her daughter Menaka when she crumbles a sheaf of new buds on the small potted plant that Sita had grown on the balcony with much labour. All these acts of violence lead Sita to think that "destruction may be the true

element in which life survives, and creation merely a freak, temporary and doomed event” (*Where*, 56). Sita is disappointed with life in the city, a crust of dull tedium, and she decides to turn back once again to the island, where she would hold her baby safely unborn by magic. The sea would wash the frenzy out of her life: “perhaps the tides would lull the children too, into smoother, softer beings. The grove of trees would shade them and protect them” (*Where*, 101). But in the island Sita finds the opposites happen. The children do not enjoy the island. It seems to Sita as if to her children, life in the city on Nepean Sea Road is “right and proper” and this so called “escape” to the island is madness. Sita does not find the island any more romantic or magical. If it had any magic in the past it is now buried beneath the “soft grey-green mildew of the monsoon, chilled and choked by it” (*Where*, 103). Nature does not remain benign, pleasant and jocund for Sita in the island. It repeatedly reminds her of the futility of her existence and her vain attempts to forget the grim realities of life.

A regular feature in most of Anita Desai’s novels is the treatment of characters. Although her characters might display a particular set of psychological complexes and represent certain universal predilections and conflicts, essentially they are independent individuals with special, distinct identities of their own. There is in each one of them a sense of deprivation caused by family ties. Maya is in search of an identity and a communion with her husband. Nirode tries to breach his family ties to set up himself independently, but fails miserably as he is unable to sever all connections from his mother. Nanda Kaul, forced into the role of a dutiful wife for a number of years, feels emotionally drained out and retires to the Simla hills to find peace in loneliness. But her alienation is very temporary, and she is unconsciously pulled back into her former life with the advent of Raka into her sequestered world. Sita and Sarah hopelessly fail to achieve their goals and in the end give in to the demands of their husbands, and surrender themselves. Bim is full of bitterness in the beginning, but eventually she tries to put things together and towards the end is able to find some kind of a resolution. Bim is a mature creation. After experimenting with five novels, Desai could create in her a mature, strong and reasonable protagonist like Bim. While the other characters give up their fights halfway, she struggles to the end to emerge victorious.

The novel *Bye-Bye Black Bird* is “the most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation.” (Atma Ram, *Anita Desai: The Novelist who writes for herself*, 40). The novel is very thin in texture. Even the imagery is very sparse. Many critics feel that the novel does have a tremendous potential for the exploration of the East-West theme besides the psychic tumult of Sarah.

The novel *Bye-Bye Black Bird*, revolves around the identity crisis and Desai draws attention to the annihilation of self that marriage involves for a female, and a theme of feminine sensibility, found in her subsequent novels. Sarah has real love and understanding for Adit but Adit sadly lacks it. Sarah's character, therefore, has more power. Adit is too preoccupied with himself to delve, into her thoughts. In Sarah there is a more fundamental and real dilemma, the real split, a keen suffering, but she triumphs over all these. She knows that a small refusal will inflame him. Thus she agrees to do whatever he likes. She does not want chaos to reflect on her marriage and would sacrifice everything to preserve it and so with all her hesitation and anxiety she accompanies Adit to India.

Desai's style is fit for all modes of thought and tension. Anita Desai's characters often suffer from an eternal female

sensibilities of disintegration and disjunction from the world around. Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock*, Sarah, in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, Sita, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, and Bimla in *Clear Light of Day* possess extremely imaginative, sensitive minds while their husbands are extremely rational, self-controlled and practical. The lack of a meeting point between their polarities of imagination and reason is the main reason for the lack of mutual understanding between them, and the poignant sense of feeling incomplete and unfulfilled. The quest for fulfilment often remains a struggle, ending in violence and self-destruction. The characters seek to fulfil themselves through their relationship in marriage and with brothers and sisters, being the most intimate. Obviously, Anita Desai is a novelist dealing mainly with feminine sensibilities, and very often her heroines come to violent ends which is discouraging, or positive endings which is highly encouraging and life-enhancing.

Anita Desai's heroines are not just variations of Nora or Alison. Her novels are then studies of the inner life of characters and since she creates a small milieu, her narrative focus becomes precise and clear. This provides her with an opportunity to observe all the minute details in the environment of the characters. Anita Desai is gifted with an extraordinary sense for details, a capacity for graphic delineation of things, usually left unnoticed and is able to present a very realistic picture.

The essay as an article seeks to explore the portrayal of women protagonist, in the fictional world of Anita Desai who are in conflict with their own mind and live in a world of chaos and confusion. The study also shows how the protagonists of Anita Desai embark on their voyages and undergo untold sufferings before they can achieve their goal. They are powerful characters, who break down under the stress of the misery, but they remain staunch individuals very much conscious of their independence and find it difficult to accept conventional equations and strike a balance with the people around them. This is only a beginning but not the end in that this paper hopes to create many more interested in the study of women, who are caught in the conflict between illusion and reality, and who also wants to be seen as launching themselves for their identity.

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