

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN THE MAJOR NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai was born in the year 1937 and is one of the popular writers of India. She is popular due to her efforts to bring psychological realism to Indian English literature. Most of her novels reflect the emotions, problems, and complications faced by her characters, mostly women with issues of loneliness and identity. The present research paper attempts to discuss critically the development of the female protagonists in the novels written by Anita Desai, who is an acclaimed writer known for psychological realism in Indian English literature. In the works of Anita Desai, women are portrayed as complex individuals facing issues related to their identity and alienation, marital disharmony, and socio-cultural constraints. There is a definite development in terms of the portrayal of female characters in the novels written by Anita Desai, from being psychologically unstable and socially isolated, as seen in the case of Maya in "Cry, the Peacock" and Monisha in "Voices in the City", to self-aware, self-reliant, and independent ones like Sita in "Where Shall We Go This Summer?", Nanda Kaul in "Fire on the Mountain", Bimla in "Clear Light of Day", and Uma in "Fasting, Feasting". The study further draws attention to the fact that Desai uses psychological elements, symbols, and an inward approach in narrating women's internal struggles. Through comparing the chosen characters, one notices a significant change in theme whereby the despair and vulnerability of women give way to strength and self-awareness. Overall, through her novels, Desai shows the evolving position of women in society.

Keywords: - Anita Desai, Protagonist, Psychological, Women, Novel

INTRODUCTION

1. Anita Desai – An author's overview

Anita Desai was born in the year 1937 and is a well-known writer in India. Her success in the world of writing is attributed to her efforts to establish psychological realism in Indian English literature. Most of her novels portray the feelings, dilemmas, and complications experienced by her characters, especially women struggling with loneliness and identity. Her achievements during her career as a writer have seen her receive awards several times because of her excellent performance in writing; she has been nominated for the Booker Prize thrice.

Anita Desai had an intriguing past. She is a product of an intercontinental marriage, born in Mussoorie to a German mother and Bengali father. As a result, Desai grew up multilingual, being proficient in not only English but also Hindi, Bengali, and German. She usually writes about the issues that include psychological insight, marital troubles, social changes, alienation, and human relations. The style of her work can be defined as poetic prose, with imagery and subjective storytelling, which makes it possible for readers to become immersed in the mental world of her protagonists. Apart from her creative activities, she was a professor of humanities at MIT. Her daughter Kiran is a renowned Booker Prize-winning author.

Some of her important literary works include novels which brought Desai critical recognition and popularity. "Cry, the Peacock", published in 1963, has been lauded for its psychological insight, and "Fire on the Mountain", published in 1977, has won her a Sahitya Akademi Award. Other famous novels by this author include "Clear Light of Day" (1980), "In Custody" (1984), and "Fasting, Feasting" (1999), the latter three books being shortlisted for the Booker Prize. "The Village by the Sea" was awarded the British Guardian Prize. Desai's bibliography consists of numerous literary masterpieces such as "Voices in the City" (1965), "Bye-Bye Blackbird" (1971), and "Baumgartner's Bombay" (1989). Due to the nature of her work, comparisons to other prominent authors are inevitable (Sawant, D. G., et al. 1937).

2. REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE PROTAGONIST

The women characters in Anita Desai have undergone a transformation from traditional, complicated, and passive women to strong and proactive women who are ready to break free from patriarchy in their lives. Her life has seen the transition of female characters from oppressed and depressed women to rebellious women who are fighting for their liberation. While women in early novels like *Cry, the Peacock*, are overly sensitive and trapped in their inner world, women in later novels like *Clear Light of Day* are fighting against the norms of society and seeking freedom by working professionally. There is a clear depiction of significant evolution among the female characters written by Anita Desai, showing a move from oppressed and suffering women to strong and rebellious women.

While Anita Desai started off writing about hypersensitive victims of the patriarchal society, she has gradually transformed them into strong-willed and independent women who are breaking free from patriarchy and creating their identity in life.

2.1. Literature in the 1960s and 1970s: Novels from the Early Period:

In her early writings, Desai often differentiates her heroes and heroines by the intense psychological pain that they endure, the severe isolation that they suffer, and their inability to integrate their personal worldviews into societal expectations.

2.2.1. MAYA

Anita Desai's literary works are renowned for representing estrangement, including that of women in a patriarchal society. The author's characters expose the mental conflict of socially isolated women, stressing the importance of lacking emotional and company support from their spouses (Sinha, 2008). Although her protagonists are unhappy with the real world, they face loneliness and despondency, thus demonstrating the internal conflict of modern Indian women.

"*Cry, the Peacock*" is Desai's famous novel in which she analyses the problems of loneliness, identity crisis, and mental compulsions that prevent people from developing relationships. In this novel, there are women like Maya, Monisha, Sita, and many other women who represent physical and intellectual isolation (Desai, 1980). This novel represents the difficulties that these women face because of their struggle for freedom in a male-dominated society.

In her writings, it is evident that she understands the difficulties caused by patriarchy for Indian women, including the education system, traditions, and laws. She shows the frustration of women who feel angry against the cultural dominance in Indian society. Through her characters, she criticises the limitations imposed on Indian women by gender conventions and psychology (Inamdar, 2000).

The main character of the novel, Maya, struggles with these issues because she is faced with the aloofness of her husband, Gautama, as well as expectations from society. Maya's fear intensifies when an astrologer predicts her imminent death, leading to her mental imbalance, which causes her to question her value as a person and to ponder the purpose of living in a world that is indifferent to her pain and suffering. Even though Maya seeks emotional intimacy, she finds herself in a world where there is no real connection emotionally.

Desai brilliantly captures Maya's state of being and portrays her gradual transformation into madness followed by her final desperate act as she is plagued by loneliness. Desai, through her writing, manages to capture the complexity of women's lives and expresses through the characters in her story the essence of the struggle and search for self-identity and freedom of women who live in a society dominated by males (Maini, 1984).

2.1.2. MONISHA

The protagonist of Monisha, a profoundly sensitive person who possesses knowledge of Kafka and Camus, appears in the second novel by Anitha Desai, named *Voices in the City* (1965). Although Monisha demonstrates such sensitivity, she seems unable to understand the taboos associated with Indian society. Monisha experiences an emptiness that makes her feel like another character, Maya; however, while Maya takes extreme measures to confront her issues, Monisha chooses to burn herself alive because of the intensity of her emotions. Through Monisha's eyes, the author portrays aspects of Indian culture and society, making the protagonist the unrecognised sovereign of Indian women's emotions.

Monisha's longing for peace continues to remain unsatisfied, primarily owing to her indifference toward the requests of her in-laws and her continuous feeling that someone is watching her, thus putting her self-identity in jeopardy. She feels alienated by the circumstances

surrounding her due to the fact that she cannot bear children; moreover, she loses all hope of her husband, Jiban, ever taking care of her emotions. Her pretense and silence reflect her transformation from reality to mundane life. In Desai's novels, the women characters have a profound understanding of philosophical principles. For example, when she is under pressure, Monisha relies on reading verses from the Bhagavad Gita, reflecting her realization of being bound by the social conventions concerning attachment and actions.

This book symbolizes Monisha's conflict with the tiring world of Calcutta, which is a place of degeneration and spiritual degradation. Her exposure to such vulgarity in society only adds to her despair and makes her vacillate between the urge to reach out and the harshness of reality. The problems she faces on account of the sterility of her offspring, ignorance about her husband and his kin, and the associated distrust necessitate Monisha keeping a journal, since through this medium, she can find comfort in a hostile world that doesn't allow her any privacy.

Her marriage with her husband signifies her desire for maternal love and support from her family members, indicating the fragility of contemporary marital relations. The restrictions imposed on her because of her adherence to traditional practices, along with the hardships she faces at home because of her mother-in-law, increase her sense of entrapment to such an extent that she resorts to burning herself alive, as she feels that there is no other escape from her unbearable situation. The pain endured by Monisha, revealed by her diary, reflects the plight of a woman in a ruthless world indifferent to her miseries.

2.1.3. SITA

The theme of dysfunctional family has been explored by Anita Desai in several pieces of literature, as reflected in "Where Shall We Go This Summer?" (1975), where she writes about Sita, who tries to understand herself after marrying Raman. In contrast to Desai's earlier works like "Cry, the Peacock", "Voices in the City", "Fire on the Mountain", and "Bye, Bye, Blackbird", "Where Shall We Go This Summer?" serves as an example of Sita's understanding of people and their motivational factors and the relationships she develops with her family members, reflecting a very intricate storyline.

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The particular character, Sita, has grown up in an unusual family where she yearns for a perfect life with her father, along with experiencing a feeling of rejection due to negligence caused by his death. The traumatic childhood of Sita leads to her extreme isolation, highlighting her challenges when dealing with herself and other people. In addition to her isolation, the absence of her Mother and Father add to her feelings of loneliness; hence, Raman takes the place of her father. On the other hand, Sita also derives no pleasure from him. The character of the bond between Sita and Raman is quite complex in nature, indicating the complexity of their marital life that is marked by misunderstanding and a lack of consideration for each other's feelings. The author describes Raman as a modernised character whose only concern is his business, while he overlooks the emotional needs of Sita, thus leading her to feel lonely and depressed. The nature of Sita's rebellion against social norms is highlighted by her attitude towards the members of her husband's family.

Symbolism has been used extensively in the story, with the eagle and crows symbolising Sita's resistance to violence in society and within herself. The eagle represents her fragility when she faces constant challenges from her surroundings. Sita's attempts to prove her individuality against societal limitations depict the psychological conflict in the story. She is determined to escape her marriage life with Raman and settle down alone on the island of Manori.

Sita ultimately embarks on a journey of self-discovery, seeking to reconcile her internal and external identities amid the chaos of her life. It is through this development of Sita that Desai focuses on the theme of self-discovery and strength, presenting Sita as a unique woman among others created by Desai, such as Maya and Monisha. Thus, this story becomes about a woman discovering her voice and independence despite the external pressure coming from society. Desai's Further works show how she continues to develop the theme of women's strength and independence when it comes to living their lives within the confines of society, especially after the 1980s when this issue became more prominent in literature.

2.1.4. NANDA KAUL

The story begins with Nanda being isolated in the hills, illustrating the complex nature of her emotional state and her need to isolate herself from the world, which has rejected her because of her independence. She finds that she would rather run away from everything and everyone since she is unable to accept her past experiences with humiliation, nor can she envision a bright future ahead for herself. She values her daydreams more than the reality of the world, and isolation acts as her shield against heartaches and treachery, considering her responsibilities to her archenemies.

Her emotional detachment is vague; at times, it serves as a facade, while at other times, it is a fundamental aspect of her personality, which makes it difficult for her to distinguish between her true self and the image she presents to others, as well as for readers to understand her authentic identity. She has no maternal feelings towards her children and brings them up by force rather than love, just like her parents did with her. After being isolated for many years, she wants her great-granddaughter, Raka, to leave her alone due to her fear of socialising.

The character of Nanda finds refuge in Carignano; it stands for the highest pinnacle of tradition and morals, yet at the same time it marks her separation from the sphere of reality. The escape from the problems of life can be interpreted as an act of cowardice, but it is due to her inability to withstand the pain of disappointment. Nanda lives in her deteriorated holiday home after becoming the wife of the vice-chancellor, avoiding all sorts of honest connections and lacking warmth and attachment to her children, whom she no longer knows.

Being alone, Nanda reflects upon her complaints against the marriage and family relationships. The infidelity of her spouse and his emotional detachment resulted in significant disillusionment with her life decisions, exposing the burdensome cultural expectations imposed on women. Following his demise, Nanda embraces her autonomy, perceiving her marriage as a vacuous experience that deprived her of her personality. The depiction of Nanda's escape to Carignano by Desai signifies a desire for liberation from past obligations and an imagined peace after a life of obligations. The reflective solitariness makes her home into a sanctuary, as well as a medium through which she analyses her life. The intrusion of Raka into her life interrupts

her solitude and forces Nanda to reflect on the meaning of her life: whether she has experienced enough fulfilment or if she can survive in the deteriorating state of her life without being affected. In essence, the Carignano symbolises the contrasting ambitions of Nanda to be alone and, at the same time, have connections. Her journey shows her struggle with her own inner hatred and disappointment in herself for failing to achieve any fulfilment in her life.

2.1.5. BIMLA (BIM)

Desai divides the novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) into two parts to better understand the story. The first story revolves around Uma, a spinster who is unable to live with her parents and is fasting. The youngster Arun, who is sent to the United States of America to study and is feasting, is the subject of the second half of the story. It is more important for Uma to live her life inside the confines of her father's home than it is for her to live her own life. Her emotions and requirements are never prioritised, and they are frequently disregarded. In this role, her mother portrays the authoritative patriarch. Everyone, including her parents and potential people who could be interested in marrying her, considers her unattractive.

The pilgrimage that Uma went on with Mira-Masi allowed her to become aware of the desires that she had repressed deep within her unconscious. These are the ideas she would contemplate while alone in her room, away from her parents. She is experiencing a growing sense of internal struggle regarding her existence and the choices she ought to make in her life. Due to his constant urge to go out and seek the best that the world has to offer, Arun develops a perspective on the status of women from an external viewpoint. While Uma discovers her desires within the confines of strong traditional familial relationships (VOLNÁ), she is able to move forward.

2.1.6. UMA'S

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3. COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELECTED PROTAGONIST

Anita Desai's women characters evolve throughout her novels, reflecting a wide range of emotional, psychological, and social issues. Maya (Cry, the Peacock) is an embodiment of Desai's early image of a psychologically fragile woman who surrenders to the stress of marital neglect and childhood trauma. Her oversensitive nature reflects Desai's focus on introspection and inner turmoil as well (Kumar, 2001). In *Voices in the City*, Monisha suffers from repressive home confinement, but unlike Maya, she internalises her despair until it destroys her. Both women reflect the negative impact of patriarchal oppression on sensitive female psyches (Bala, 1991).

Sita (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*) portrays the process from fragmentation to rebellion. Although emotionally fragile, she tries to reassert herself by retreating to her native island home, thus rebelling against cultural and familial conventions. Her act of rebellion is one of psychosocial protest and not personal fragmentation (Nirmala, 2013). Nanda Kaul of *Fire on the Mountain* personifies the need for maturity and aloneness on the part of a woman who has been serving society through the roles of wife and mother for years. Her act of being alone is well thought out, but she fails when confronted with her suppressed memories (Roy, 2015).

Bimla in *Clear Light of Day* marks a significant shift in Desai's writing towards resilient female protagonists. Strong, full of responsibilities, and emotional hurt, Bim carries the cross of family

duty. Unlike Maya or Monisha, she achieves reconciliation and emotional maturity, which means growth, not disintegration (Sharma, 2012). Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* depicts another dimension. She is socially incapable and constantly belittled but endures through acceptance and silent endurance. Her growth is not about getting away but about silently enduring the persistent oversight by the family (Prasad, 2016), which ultimately leads her to develop a deeper understanding of her identity and strength in the face of adversity. The progression in Desai's portrayal moves from disintegrating, vulnerable women to emotionally burdened, resilient women and ends with the women who gain inner strength and endurance. This progression is indicative of Desai's thematic movement from psychological disintegration to emotional resilience and survival.

CONCLUSION

This concludes that the story of Desai makes use of another significant development in the female characters that she created. The female heroes no longer possess the traits of traditional complex women; instead, they become strong enough to fight against the patriarchal system and attain their freedom. Her previous heroines, such as Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, were portrayed as suffering from mental anguish and loneliness and unable to sync between themselves and the outer world. She demonstrates the feeling of isolation that women go through in patriarchal societies. Monisha, in *Voices in the City*, is another strong character, intellectually active but still isolated from society. Contrary to Maya's tendency to suffer, Monisha chooses to burn herself in flames to express her emotions. Sita, the main character in *"Where Shall We Go This Summer?"*, is trying to resolve her identity crisis after having a disappointing marriage. She needs emotional assurance because her reliance on her husband shows that families can be fragile institutions. Symbolism used, such as the eagle, highlights her insecurity in the face of social pressures, while her quest for identity indicates her empowerment to overcome her fears and establish herself in the difficult surroundings. Nanda Kaul in *"Fire on the Mountain"* demonstrates how members of an older generation try to avoid the responsibilities to society because of their disillusionment with past relations. Her story addresses emotional detachment and self-reliance and questions the satisfaction one finds in being alone. On the other hand, Uma's character is contrasted with Arun in *"Fasting, Feasting"* written by Desai to show the disparities in their lives owing to the patriarchal element in society.

While Arun enjoys many luxuries in life, Uma has to face several difficulties during her lifetime, ranging from rejection by her family members; thus, it becomes clear how difficult life is for women despite societal pressures and privileges that men enjoy. The experiences of Uma indicate her ability to cope with societal pressures.

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