



Psychoanalytical Fiction in the Works of Anita Desai

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Abstract:

Anita Desai, as a novelist adds a new dimension to Indian English fiction by concentrating on the exploration of the troubled sensibility which is a typical modern Indian phenomenon. In her hands, Indian English Fiction has acquired a depth which it seldom had before. This paper is an attempt to focus on Anita Desai's use of symbols and its psychoanalytic implications as projected in her works. In her novels, she introduces a shift of ideational focus from the outer to the inner part of human existence. I have tried to examine this interplay of thoughts and emotions which is also reflected in her use of language, imagery and symbols. Dealing with the thoughts, emotions and sensation at various levels of consciousness, Anita Desai found the technique used by D.H Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Henry James which is quite suitable for her purpose of character delineation. Hence, we have use of flashbacks and the stream-of-consciousness technique in some of her novels, mainly in her first novel, Cry, the Peacock which is considered as "the first step" in the direction of psychological fiction in Indian writing in English. The novels of Anita Desai raise many issues of universal relevance and they deserve a comprehensive review, the aim and intent of present paper is to reflect on her use of symbolism in portraying the inner realities of her characters. It will also contribute to the psychological study of her characters in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis; Symbolism; Stream-of-Consciousness; Narrative

The psychological portrayal of characters through the use of symbolism and dream are some of the important fictional techniques that have been used by Anita Desai in her novels. As we know Psychoanalysis is an interpretive art. It seeks to find meaning in the behaviour of people and in the arts they create. One way we can apply psychoanalytic theory is by understanding how the human psyche works and how to interpret the hidden significance of what people and characters in the fiction do. Psychoanalytic criticism argues that literary texts like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties. Here, symbols play an important role in analyzing the hidden motives of the characters portrayed by the author. It gives us a deep insight into their inner psyche. Symbols can be an object, an institution, an idea or a thought. In a psychological text, characters are often portrayed symbolically. In fact symbols are messages from our subconscious.

Like psychoanalysis itself, the psychoanalytic critical endeavour seeks evidence of unresolved

emotions, psychological conflict, guilt, ambivalence and so forth within what may well be a disunified literary work. The authors own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflict, fixations, and such will be traceable within the behaviour of characters in the literary work. The unconscious material has been distorted by the censoring conscious mind through the use of symbolism in particular. The psychologists like Freud and Jung have also attempted to define the term "symbol". While Freud's view, symbols are "unconscious ideation" Jung holds that they are not the result of rational thinking, but of a psychic process of development. Thus we can say in psychoanalytic interpretation of any literary text, symbolism is of particular importance since it can serve as a defence mechanism of the 'ego', as where unconscious or forbidden, aggressive or sexual impulses come to expression through symbolic representation and thus are able to avoid censorship. According to this theory, then we mask our unconscious sexual and aggressive desires through symbolization,



which enables us to escape guilt from the 'superego'. Anita Desai is considered as one of the pioneers of the psychological fiction in Indian English writing. Her novels are replete with the use of symbolism. Hence, it becomes pertinent to analyse the use of symbolism in her art of fiction writing from a psychoanalytic viewpoint.

As a novelist, Anita Desai eschews traditional practices and gives free rein to her individual vision. Her protagonists are socio-psychic rebels alienated selves who find it difficult to compromise with this milieu. Her characters reflect the mythic reality of our life through the complex interaction of the self and the society. The Indo-Anglican novels till 1970s treated themes of political and social import. They have handled their stories based on the princes and paupers, saints and sinners, farmers and labours, untouchable and coolies, cities and villages. The more impressive and sophisticated themes like country's independence movement, East-West encounter, tradition and modernity, dealt by great writers like Raja Rao, Kamla Markandaya and Kushwant Singh. The very notion of the exploration of the human mind was alien to them. The English novelists before Anita Desai have studied man and his world in relation to the objective social reality. They used their art as a powerful instrument to present social problems. Desai approach is different. She writes neither for providing entertainment nor for the propagation of social issues. Her main pre-occupation is to study human existence and human predicament, her exploration being a quest for self. She is the novelist of psycho-emotional situation and her theme is the individual against this milieu. It is only with the arrival of Anita Desai that such long neglected themes were given an emotionally poetic treatment. She presents a kaleidoscopic image of the minds of her characters. She makes known to us the unconscious motives of human psyche, the problem of human relationship, the protagonist's quest for identity in almost in all her novels.

As a novelist she denies the importance of theories in the shaping of artistic imagination. According to her a work of art should grow from

within from the writer's inner beckoning and compulsions.

This inner world of sensibility rendered through splendid poetic prose gives a "peculiarpoetic quality" of Anita Desai novels. Desai's debut novel, *Cry, the Peacock* fully exhibits her symbolist imagination. It explores the inner world of human beings, and demonstrates the causes of their strange behaviour and fear. Since she is concerned with the depths of inner self, the psyche of her characters, she employs symbolism to express their real feelings and thoughts. Obviously, the novel abounds in symbolic situations, episodes, scenes, characters, etc. But these symbols are not limited to any particular sphere of life; they are drawn from human life and nature, particularly from trees, animals, birds, seasons, atmosphere, etc. In this novel, the writer intermingles the past and the present of the central character Maya by having recourse to the stream-of consciousness technique. The writer uses both the past and the present symbolically to show the depths and causes of the protagonist's anguish, despair, dread and ultimate tragedy. She is developed as a hysterical character whose impending tragedy is suggestively foreshadowed time and again.

The novel opens with the death of Maya's pet dog, Toto. The end of the dog symbolises the constant presence of the death in human life. The nearness of death also terrifies Maya, and she is obsessed with it. She is childless, and her dog stands for her as a child, fulfilling her need for the love of a baby. Her husband Gautama sends away the body of dog in the Municipal van. His cold indifference to the death of a pet is symbolic of his unawareness of the feelings of his wife. It can also be inferred as lack of communication and genuine understanding between the husband and the wife. The different reactions of Maya and her husband to the death of a pet dog symbolise two different approaches to life. While Gautama takes death to be a normal event, Maya is greatly disturbed by it. It suggests that he is fully aware of the realities of life and does not fear the presence of death, but she loves life so much that she is always has hysterics at the sight of death.



The death of the dog is also symbolic of her imminent tragic end.

Furthermore the inseparability of life and death is symbolically shown by the novelist through Maya's thoughts. Anita Desai successfully employs the technique of interior monologue to reflect on Maya's inner psyche and her mental dwindling. Sitting in the garden, she suddenly remembers the Queen of the Night attracts snakes.

The drum-beats symbolise the echoes of the presence of death, and so in her unconscious the nearer she feels the death the louder she hears these drum-beats. It also evokes the image of lord Shiva performing his 'tandava' the destructive dance which is a famous Indian myth. In fact one can notice, Maya's mind is constantly seized by the fear of death, though she is not conscious of it. This is the reason she appears to be happy with the darkness of ignorance and with night.

The night is symbolic of her longing for death. Apparently for Maya death is the end of all her mental agony and suffering that life has given her. Day stands for life which has become frustrating for her and death becomes the only healer of her pangs and pain. The sky, studded with stars, does not attract her anymore; rather, she feels that in between the stars the empty dark places are the abode of death that does not spare anyone.

In fact she unconsciously feels alienated from her father and it is this separation which disturbs her very much the darkness between the stars is symbolic of death, and the distance between them symbolises the distance between her father and her.

Another novel of Anita Desai which I would like to discuss in this particular context is *Voices in the City*. The very title of the novel is symbolic and it suggests the aspirations of different people living in one city i.e. Calcutta. The voices symbolise the different attitudes and behaviours of human beings towards inner and outer realities of life. *Voice in the City* is Anita Desai's second novel. It deals with the psychological problems of the youths of today. As it is mainly about the growth and working of psyche, it is rich in

symbolism. The novelist makes an extensive use of symbols to delineate the true nature of man's thought-process and the way he mentally perceives and comprehends things. The novel is cantered upon the search of three main characters- Nirode, Monisha and Amla- for a meaningful and happy life. The city of Calcutta which is presented symbolically as a living character traps all the major characters by its evil forces. They suffer immensely while passing through different stages of failure and struggle, and their mental sufferings are depicted through variegated symbols. The novel opens with the departure of Arun, the younger brother of Nirode from Calcutta. His departure reminds Nirode of his own failure in life.

Though Nirode envies his brother, his longing for darkness suggests his desire for failure in life. He wants to see life through failures. The source of Nirode's desire to meet failure in life and have the spirit to move again towards the next failure lies in his deep rooted mother fixation.

In the course of his journey Nirode realises the importance of having a successful and independent life. He is no more interested to see the life through failures.

However, Nirode's success as a journalist doesn't give him happiness. Anita Desai has depicted the wavering mind of young generation through the character of Nirode. He keeps on searching for true happiness and meaning of life. He is bored with the magazine and decides to write a book. The play which he writes is also quite autobiographical. This is reflective of Nirode's own inner trauma and sufferings.

This theme symbolises Nirode's consciousness of his loss of faith in life and of his search for it. His wavering mind and shattered faith in his mother is suggested by the fall of the young man in the manhole in the play. After this, Nirode is a totally changed person and is unable to trust people anymore. Though he hates his mother in his conscious mind, his subconscious is not free for her love. The high fever, from which he suffers, in fact, symbolises the heat of the realisation of his true inner self. Though he is devoid of any soft feelings and emotions at the outer level, but his fever symbolises the burning

desire of love for his mother inside. Monisha's death gives Nirode insight into the true meaning of life. Her suicide doesn't depress him; on the contrary he is very excited. He realises that the true meaning of life lies in death. It is the comprehension of this reality that makes him celebrate the death of his sister as if it were: "the death of a saint." The death of his sister suddenly opens a gate of knowledge to him.

The description of Monisha's room in the novel is also symbolical and suggestive of her own mental agony. It contains "a black, four-postered bed in the centre, and a gigantic black wardrobe against the wall." The black colour is the symbol of lonely and melancholic life. It is the reflection of Monisha's mental status as she feels familiar with this dark aspect of life. Her mental depression is very well depicted through the expedition of zoo. It has a symbolic significance as well. In the Zoo, she feels little happy to see the cheerful open space where "the jaruls are in bloom...and all the milk white peacocks dance..." But this pleasure is momentarily. Soon she is reminded of her own barrenness by a Kangaroo lying on its back with its empty pouch. This is also suggestive of her own life at her in-laws' house. The different animals symbolically reveal the working of her subconscious mind. Seeing the wild ducks, she wonders "why don't they fly out of the city, into the open.?" This is symbolic of her subconscious mind provoking her conscious self to run away from her in-laws. In everything Monisha tries to find out the answer to her despair life. She goes to music conference. In a state of depression she feels betrayed by the performers at the conference. However, she identifies herself with the *sitar* player who produces music: "with tender undertone of deep melancholy and solitary sorrow". Further the *sitar* and the *tabla* player's start questioning and answering among each other respectively. The *sitar* player is always answered by the *tabla* player confidently. They are the symbolic of pain and despair, and of logical reasoning and outer reality of life. The argument between them reflects her inner conflict between her sorrow and desperate search of identity and her logical bent of mind.

Monisha's snatching away Nirode's play from her husband Jiban's hand in fury is a symbolic of her strong desire for privacy, for secretiveness at every cost. Though she wants to be a rebel, she does not find herself strong enough. She feels her life is a waste, "so imperfect, so handicapped."

Amla is another important character of the novel. Her psyche can also be explored symbolically. She goes to Calcutta to start her career as a commercial artist. She is bristled with high spirit, hope and enthusiasm. She is excited about her new life in the big city. Amla decorates her hair with the flowers to appear more lively and cheerful. Her action is symbolic of her efforts to keep herself alive and full of spirits. Anita Desai symbolically depicts Amla's ignorance about the reality of these flowers. It suggests that Amla is ignorant of the reality of life. Soon it becomes evident that Amla is depressed by her friendless life.

The other characters of the novel like Dharma and David are also portrayed symbolically and the symbols are representative of their present state of mind. Dharma is inspired by Amla's transparency. He finds in Amla a new life. It makes her interested in the inner world of man. While painting her inner self, he realises that it is this which actually shapes the outer personality of man. His style of painting changes totally and this is symbolic of his transformation.

David, unlike Nirode, sees life from a positive point of view. He is portrayed as a foil to Nirode. His quest for the truth of life makes him an ardent traveller. As he looks out of the train at the Bengal countryside, he gets ecstatic, and wishes that the fantastic sight, enormously rich in symbols and images of various kinds.

David's wish shows his craving for permanent happiness in life. He is aware of the ephemeral in life, but he trusts his instincts and sets out wherever his instincts lead. This is where Nirode lacks completely; he does not trust anything, not even his own heart and soul.

The other minor characters in this novel are also important as they contribute to the psychological study of character portrayal and provide us different insight of human psyche. Sony, a minor character in the novel, reflects another side of the

search for identity. He is afraid of individuality, and so sticks to the past of his family. Symbolically, he is fond of his old riding boots, old jackets, trousers, scarf, etc. He represents that side of life which Nirode has left in order to get his own identity. His escape from reality is suggested by his obsession with his past.

Conclusion:

Anita Desai thus uses fictional techniques such as; flashback, stream-of consciousness technique, dream, fantasy, symbolism and so on. to reflect the inner loneliness, pain and conflict of her major characters both men and women. It does not only give the poetic quality to her novels but also help to portray and explore the hidden psyche of her characters. In fact she can be considered as technical innovator in the field of Indian English Fiction Writings. It enables her to narrate the story, to portray the characters, to convey the mood, to evoke the atmosphere and to probe the inner most psyche of her characters. Desai's other novels such as *Clear Light of the Day*, *Where Shall I Go This Summer?*, and *Fire on the Mountain* also evoke similar critical study of Desai's fictional technique used for the psychoanalytical portrayal of characters. It can be averred that Anita Desai, like the modern psychological novelists, is primarily concerned with the exploration and delineation of psyche, with the examination and presentation of the inner being of people, and not with the external life of systematic thinking.

Every writer is in constant search and communication of this truth. Such truth cannot be conveyed through the medium through the medium of language in its literal and direct form. It has to be in figurative language. This is one of the reasons there is abundant use of symbolism in her novels. She remarks about the unconscious use of symbols in her novels:

I use them unconsciously. I mean I employ metaphors and images which acquire significance and suggest deeper meaning that they state i.e. turn into symbols.

Thus by shifting to the realms of the human psyche, she brought the Indo-Anglican novel into the main stream of European and American fiction. The gradual growth of fiction in India is made by the gradual shifting from external world to the inner world of the individual.

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