

# Anita Desai as Spokesperson of Contemporary Women

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## ABSTRACT

*Anita Desai's main concern is to project the inner working of her characters in general, and her female characters in particular. She is primarily interested in depicting the interior landscapes of the female characters and exposes fully the working of their minds. By peeping into their minds, Desai highlights the psychological trauma of their psyche.*

## PAPER

Anita Desai occupies a towering and dominating place among the writers of younger generation who contributed a great deal to the development of psychological analysis of her female characters. Her female characters are the perfect spokesmen of the injured psyche of

the females of modern women. Anita Desai has powerfully and forcefully delineated the psychological dilemma of her heroines in a vivid manner. There is no doubt in denying the fact that for her the problem is not social, but psychological. That is why she is totally different from the novelists like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan whose main concern is to deal with the whole society, but Anita Desai does not care for the whole society,

rather the problems of the individuals are her focus of attention.

Contemporary literature deals with the emotional problems of the modern women, their injuries, frustration and violations that an uprooted individual undergoes. A good number

of Indian writers have dealt with the experience of women rights violations and women related issues in a profound manner. In the list, Anita Desai has been regarded as one of those Indian English novelists who have contributed much to the development of Indian English novel. She has dexterously portrayed the pathetic struggle the women undergo in their life. Her women refute and defy the patriarchal norms to liberate them from the clutches of the traditional myths of subjugation and submission. Anita Desai's women are victims of circumstances in an uncongenial environment and they fight a persistent battle against her lost self and, in this process of the search, is doomed to degeneration and destruction. As throughout history, woman has been left totally defenseless before the forces of aggression, arrogance, harassments and deprivation. Anita Desai, in her psychological novels, presents the image of a suffering woman preoccupied with her inner world, her frustration, her mental

trauma in a male dominated society. Dealing with the thoughts, emotions, and sensations at various levels of consciousness, she found the technique used by D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Henry James quite suitable for her purpose of character delineation. Her characters have a strong basis of convictions and faiths. She has presented the shadowy part of life, especially, women suffer against the hardships. She depicts more about unsuccessful married life of women in her novels. They are afflicted with the sense of loneliness, alienation and so on. They have to fight a battle to overcome the subordination and a secondary place offered to them by men to sustain their existence and make their survival fit. The study of isolation experienced by women in a male dominated society is a significant modern trend.

Anita Desai's novels like *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and her latest novel *Fasting, Feasting*

explore the issues of gender from the Indian socio-historical perspective. Anita Desai deals with the mind and the soul of the character, the inner workings of psyche and hidden and silent thoughts rather than outer appearances. Her main business as a fiction writer is to expose the truth. Desai's emphasis on the study of the individual as an aggregate of psychic and emotional impulses leads her novels to what might be called novels of character as says K.R.Srinivasa Iyenger: "Since her pre-occupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outside world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of her characters."<sup>1</sup> The main characters are psychologically disturbed, morbid, self-absorbed and incoherent in their manner and expression. One of the significant issues which novels round the fictional world of Anita Desai is her truthful presentation of the tension and conflict between tradition and modernity,

convention and innovation, individual existence and social dominance and above all between the inner reality and the outer world. In her novels, Desai portrays the neurotic mind of her women who encounter afflictions in their marital and domestic life. She points out the insurmountable adversities that disturb their peaceful atmosphere and all their surroundings. Anita Desai is one of those few Indian novelists in England who have tried to understand closely the predicament of their female characters. Her female characters, says Madhusudhan Parsad: "are pre-occupied by an eternal quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that is required to sustain in the chaotic and seeming meaningless world."<sup>2</sup> She represents the welcome 'creative release of the feminine sensibility' which began to emerge perceptibly on the literary horizon after the Second World War. She tries to introduce a neopsychological vein and projects a sensibility generally not encountered with other Indo-Anglican writers

of fiction. Anita Desai lays stress on the art of characterization. She insists on analyzing her characters, and the anecdotes are important only in so far as they reflect the obsession and suppressions of her characters. Anita Desai is considered as the writer who introduced the psychological novel in the tradition of Virginia Woolf to India. She is one of the most powerful contemporary Indian novelists in English. She is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation than with action, experience and achievement. Here, Maya's marriage is very traditional and they do not have a mutual understanding with one another. Maya being the more sensitive, hence she is unable to tolerate the frustrations faced by her. As her name suggests, she can only survive in a world of illusions. Turning away from her husband, she attempts to find an outlet for her pent up emotions and passions through her experience of nature. Anita Desai is consciously using images which occur to Maya's state of mind.

She thinks about worms, snakes, lizards that are creeping on her body. Even the death of her pet dog gives the feeling of absence because she is barren. In the novel *Voices in the City* she depicts the corrosive effects of city life of an Indian family-a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the cross current of changing social values and norms. Brought up in the serene hills of Kalimpong by an over-indulgent mother, Nirode and Monisha settle down in Calcutta. While his elder sister leads a life of servile existence within the strict confines of a traditional, extended Hindu family, Nirode is absorbed in a Bohemian life in the metropolis. Like Maya, Monisha is also childless and unable to find an emotional support from her husband. She is in a conventional joint family but feels lonely. She is alienated in her own sorrow. She craves for love, concern, care and commitment. Both, Monisha and Nirode fail to reach out each other due to joint family hindrances. Desai's very first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* is about Maya,

who is unable to relate her emotions to her husband Gautama. Unlike the western tradition, in the Indian middle class families, the couples generally go through arranged marriages and do not choose each other. But now the trend is being changed. Modern Indian women find their own match Anita Desai is thus like Jane Austen, a master delineator of wonderful characterization. In this regard, in *Voices in the City*, Nirode and Amla are supplements to Monisha whose struggle is of her creation as . J. K. Dodiya and K.V.Surendren say: "Anita Desai's women can be seen fighting with hostile situations in their lives."<sup>3</sup> Her extraordinary energy of visualization, as usual with Anita Desai's heroines, provides her with sharp reactions against the degrading social out looks and ethical degradation. Here, empowerment of women is seen very less. In India, empowerment of women is largely relied on many different variables that include

geographical location and educational status. Policies on women empowerment prevail at the national, state and local levels in many departments, including health, economic opportunities, gender-based violence and political participation. But practical implications are not encouraging. Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock* is a spoilt and pampered daughter of a wealthy Brahmin and is married to Gautama, an older man, insensitive, pragmatic and rational lawyer who fails to understand her sensitive nature. She suffers from father-obsession and looks for the typical father image in her husband. Childless, with an uncaring husband, she is lonely and loneliness is the bane and burden of her psyche. Maya's tragedy is that there is no one to share her feelings. *Voices in the City* deals with an account of the odyssey of two world-weary young women doomed to reside in Calcutta. Monisha's situation is a typical representation of the social situation of numerous young married women in India. She

and her husband do not have mutual understanding. So, she develops an incurable claustrophobia and commits suicide. Mrs. Desai makes each work of hers a haunting discovery of the inner psychic self. Mrs. Desai presents the problems which are not corporal but mental. For instance, in *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya is greatly tormented and upset by the death of her pet dog. She does not have the courage to face or accept the realities of the world. The delineation of the inner confrontations and conflicts in the minds of individuals particularly in the lives of the persecuted and abandoned women under the patriarchal domination is one of the favourite themes of the writers of the world. *Cry, the Peacock*, is a representative novel of Anita Desai portraying the inner confrontations of the characters. She has imparted psychological significance and implication to it where upon she came to be recognized as an exponent of the psychological novels.

#### References:

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2. Madhu Sudan Prasad, *Anita Desai: The Novelist*. (Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981)p.87
3. J. K. Dodiya, K.V. Surendran, *Indian Women Writers; Critical Perspective*. (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 1999)p.123