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Fragments of the Self: Conflict and Identity in the Women of Anita Desai

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

*Anita Desai's fiction offers a profound exploration of the fragmented self, particularly through the inner lives of her female protagonists. This paper examines how Desai portrays psychological conflict and identity formation in women navigating the pressures of tradition, patriarchy, and modernity. Through close readings of novels such as *Clear Light of Day*, *Cry*, *the Peacock*, and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, the study reveals how emotional isolation, cultural displacement, and existential anxiety shape the contours of female subjectivity. Desai's women are often caught between silence and expression, duty and desire, reflecting a fractured self that resists simplistic categorization. By situating these narratives within the framework of feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory, the paper argues that Desai's work not only articulates the complexities of gendered identity but also challenges dominant representations of Indian*

womanhood. The analysis underscores how Desai's nuanced portrayal of interiority becomes a site of resistance and redefinition, offering a literary space where fragmented selves seek coherence and voice.

Key Words

Anita Desai, Female Identity, Psychological Conflict, Feminist Literary Criticism, Emotional Isolation, Existential Anxiety.

Introduction

Anita Desai is a great Indian woman novelist in English. She feels that freedom implies liberty in to, such as the nexus of ideas that make up the background of her conception of human life. There is, perhaps, nothing really new in these ideas, but Anita Desai continues to work in her novels with a significant difference. In her novels there is the recognition that liberty is at one with creativity and that only pure freedom can make the world happy. Yet no theory of human nature is new. Anita Desai stresses purposes fail miserably without positive action and then comes to our mind some chance, purposelessness or cross-purpose. The madness of Anita Desai's heroines echoes the same. Their voices terminate in madness, and again, in action that appears half-accidental and half-willed.

In larger part of her novels she has philosophic formulation, but not the age-old philosophic problems. She merely, but adequately, describes some phenomena of human life, such as, the problem of taste, the

question of nature and origin of values. Her preferences can be listed by different colors of vision that seems very important for telling us either what this or that man or what men or women in general are. She projects the situation and creates such individuals without any recourse to the ideas of beauty. Rather they have integral relation to what the individual essentially is or becoming. In this connection we have her characters based on existential psychoanalysis. The most magnificent part of her novels is the dialogues or the monologues.

In *Voices in the City* Desai gives us three major characters that are tortured by their own meaninglessness and hollow existence. Consciously or sub-consciously they go deep into their own psyche and expose their inner-selves. Her Nirode is, in fact, a rootless character without any definite goal in life as he changes his goals one after another. He is obsessed by failure in achieving success in life that creates a void, a sense of emptiness. This he admits to his friend David:

...I want to fail-quickly. Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock-bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder all you find at the top is apace, all you can do is leap off, all to the bottom. I want to get there without that meaningless climbing. I want to descend quickly. (Desai, Anita, Voices in the City, 40)

In an interview with Atma Ram, replying to a question regarding *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* Anita Desai observes:

".....of all my novels it is most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation." (Atmaram, 43)

In this novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* we have her deep existentialist concern exploring adjustment, belonging and ultimate decision in the lives of three major character Dev, one of those eternal immigrants who can never accept their new homes and continue to walk the street life strangers in enemy-territory, frozen, listless, but dutifully trying to be busy, unobtrusive and, however, superficially to belong. At each step Dev's reconciliation suggests a psychic situation that involves cross-cultural contacts and the impact they have no individual responsibility.

Desai's protagonists are placed in comparatively free positions. They are aliens or orphans either factually or emotionally. They come from incomplete families where either one or both the parents are dead or absent. The protagonists either disown themselves or are disowned by their families. Maya, in *Cry, The Peacock*, has only memory of her mother through the photo on her father's desk. The Ray children in *Voices in the City*, at least four of the, are alienated in different degrees from their mother Sita's mother in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* had run away from home leaving her children to the care of their father. A similar withdrawal from her parents is there on the part of Sarah in *Bye-Bye-Blackbird*. She has, at one stroke, placed herself outside the family and cultural situation by marrying an Indian. In *Clear light of the Day* the children resent the long absences of their parents and they are aware only of their exits and entrances.

Nature is not merely a matter of heredity; rather it is a matter of inclination and tendency. It is a combination of instinct, feelings and thought, unconscious or sub-conscious. It moves towards wholeness to reach a position of being self-critical. The division of self has its own function. It leads to self-knowledge and self-understanding. A similar sense of unreality haunts Sarah in *Bye-Bye-Blackbird*. She worries and wonders about her identity and the two sides of her character. The two roles do not seem to match or meet. She feels life an imposter if she plays the role of English Secretary when she is the Indian wife:

They were roles and when she is not playing them she was nobody, her face was only a mask, her body wondered...if she would ever be allowed to step-off the Stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world. (*Voices in the City*, 40)

Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1982) is more symbolic and a new and positive direction to the novelist's creative imagination is seen in this novel. The novel is in three parts. Part one and Part three fall under the heading "Monsoon" 67, Part two is entitled "winter" 47. The Monsoon is a season of rains, storms and new life while winter symbolizes coldness, past and all that is dead. Here the Monsoon stands for Sita's (the female protagonist of the novel) mental conditions from the emotional storm up to the birth of her new self, the fifth child. Winter again is the symbol of decay, for the image of her father degenerates and almost fades in her mind during this part of the year.

The novel "*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*" like its prototypes.....one time-worn and the other trendy (*The Ramayana* and *To The light House* respectively) build around the metaphor of voyage. This novel closely resembles "*To the Light House*" in having an island setting; a father-fixation image and division into three sections, among other parallels and again it resembles the great epic *The Ramayana* in having names of the characters which are symbolic. Sita- is a name which in Hindu mythology is synonymous with troubles, tortures and separation from husband. In this novel, Sita is presented as the very embodiment of misery, agony and alienation. The name of Sita's husband is Raman which sounds like Rama, the husband of Sita in Hindu mythology: though his character is not developed on this line in the novel.

The novel begins with the return of heroine Sita to her dead father's house after long twenty years. Moses, a caretaker of the house right from the time of her father was still alive, receives her. Her father, an idol of the island and always worshipped as God there is still recalled for his greatness. Obviously, Moses expects that daughter must have at least inherited her father's dignity, but to his surprise he finds that "she didn't have it – had nothing in fact, not even one piece of valuable luggage, seemed quite empty, vacant, stumbling". This is certainly suggestive of vacuum in her life. She has had a strange, unusual childhood spent amidst the crowds, without any sense of self-identity or belonging. Her father... a freedom fighter, who settles later in an island to carry out his social and spiritual experiment; her brother and sister are all alien and enigmatic to her. The neglect, the confusion and the isolation she suffered during her formative years making her a very unpredictable, excessively emotional, and intolerant woman. Her neurosis is a result of a total negligence and indifference. She suffers from father-fixation. She goes to the island to get rid of the emptiness for life, at least partially. But she is shocked to see the miserable condition of the island which was once a golden place to her. She now accepts defeat gracefully and returns with her husband Raman who is a deliverer. The cycle is complete now. We are back in the 1967 Monsoon season and Sita begins to fill the need to accept life and growth in relation to the sea fish and the children and they leave the world of magic for the world of reality. The ending is an expected one as the reader knows that Sita can't keep the child for ever in her womb and her destiny lies with her husband.

Clear Light of Day can be treated as a four dimensional novel. The anguish of a sensitive young woman caught between movement and stillness has been rendered here in this novel like a musical piece of work. The novel begins with the song of a koel and ends with the song of the old master. The Koel belongs to the eternal world of nature but the old master's voice belongs to age and time. The artist discovers the true sources of ageless and time-less experiences. The changes are explicit in the contrast between the young disciple and the old master. The four sections of the novel suggest the four dimensions of time. They record the changes that take place in a family in a New Delhi. Though Bim is the central character, the primary focus is not on her. There is an attempt to see the events in time from the perspective of childhood and age. In a sense, the novel is about the growth of four children in an absurd world.

The young girls Bim and Tara grow up. Their parents are indifferent and disinterested. They have to cope with 'a diabetic mother and a father who is nothing but a master of entrance and exit'. They have also to live with a mentally retarded brother. Besides, they have the responsibility of tending to a young tubercular brother and an alcoholic old aunt. Thus, they have to live in an absurd world where indifference, disease and irrationality seem to thwart all normal human responses. This domestic drama of absurdity takes place against

the background of partition of the country. It suggests another pattern of violence, bloodshed and absurdity. The death of the parents makes the children emotionally destitutes. Tara, the younger girl, gets married and goes abroad with her husband. Raja, the elder of the two brothers gets married to the daughter of his Muslim neighbor, Haider Ali. He leaves Delhi and settles down in Hyderabad. Thus, Bim is left to look after the house and the mentally deficient Baba.

The novelist picks up the story at a point where Tara and her husband Bakul are visiting home after a lapse of time. They have come in anticipation of the wedding of Raja's daughter, Moyna. This incident provides an opportunity to see the action from a dual perspective of past and present. This juxtaposition of the past and the present, the near and the remote, the subjective and the objective, shows changing dimension of reality.

The title of the novel has got two perspective symbols. There is the perspective of the childhood, and there is another perspective of experience and maturity. In the one, we see the movement, in the other, a kind of stillness. The contrasts that Anita Desai suggests between these two perspectives are central to the aesthetic design of the novel.

On coming back her home, Tara is utterly surprised to find that nothing has changed in her home in these years and the same dull state is prevailing. She remarks to her elder sister, Bim:

Now everything goes on and on here and never changes. I used to think about it all and it is all exactly the same whenever we come home. To... this remark Bim replies to her: But you would not want to return to life as it used to be, would you? All that dullness, boredom waiting, would you care to live that over again? Of course not. Do you know anyone who would secretly, sincerely in his innermost self, really prefer to return to childhood? (*Lear Light*, 1980)

The Village by the Sea is intended for the younger reader. It has a deceptive simplicity but it continues to go deeper on the concerns of Desai's earlier novels. Desai has used the juxtaposition of her value structures, the charm of the remote, and she shows issues of family relationships. It is an Indian family-story. The story in this novel is the story of a family disintegrating under the pressures. It is not of alienation and self-brooding; it is poverty, illness and drunkenness. There is conscious presentation of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. The novel begins in a natural surrounding of village Thule which is situated on the sea-shore. Lila, a young girl is introduced first to the reader. Her mother is ill and her father is a do-nothing type of man. Her young brother, Hari, is prudent and intelligent. Besides Hari, she has two sisters Bela and Kamala. Her fisher-man father has now sold out his to pay off the debt. He is in the habit of taking drink at night and sleeping throughout the day.

Lila is a very responsible girl. She looks after her brother and sisters. By now, Lila and Hari have left the schools and they have to shoulder the domestic burden. Once Hari sees some outsiders in the village and wants to know from his friend Rama about the affairs. He is told that a factory is to be set-up at Thule. At this, he shares temporary happiness with his friend as he hopes to get some job, there. The same feeling he also shares with Lila who comes to the field with Hari's lunch. There they plan out their future. They are worried about their father who was still sleeping with excess intake of toddy.

Anita Desai's novels explore the dilemma of existence. Her characters do not seek truth of life but a meaning of existence in the labyrinth of life. One may gather the impression that they fail to search a meaningful life, but a new dimension of existence has been explored. As every-day-life grows insufferable, Sita, the protagonist of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Desires to go out to seek refuge in the magic island of Manori: 'If reality were not to be borne, then, illusion was the only alternative'. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul wants to live all alone. This is Anita Desai's truth of life which her characters realize through different shades of life. The novelist's search for meaning in life is, in fact, a search for the meaning of existence.

Conclusion

Thus, Anita Desai's literary canvas is richly textured with the emotional and psychological landscapes of women who grapple with the fragmentation of self in a world shaped by cultural expectations, patriarchal

constraints, and existential uncertainties. Her protagonists do not conform to idealized notions of femininity; instead, they embody the tensions between tradition and individuality, silence and articulation, belonging and alienation. Through introspective narratives and evocative prose, Desai foregrounds the inner turmoil of women whose identities are in flux neither wholly assimilated nor entirely rebellious.

This study has shown that Desai's portrayal of female subjectivity is not merely a reflection of societal pressures but a profound inquiry into the nature of selfhood itself. Her women are not passive victims but complex figures whose fractured selves become sites of resistance, introspection, and potential transformation. By illuminating these inner conflicts, Desai challenges reductive representations of Indian womanhood and opens up a literary space where ambiguity, vulnerability, and strength coexist.

Ultimately, Desai's fiction invites readers to reconsider identity not as a fixed essence but as a dynamic and contested terrain. In doing so, she contributes significantly to feminist and postcolonial discourses, offering a voice to those whose stories often remain unheard. The fragments of the self, as depicted in her work, are not signs of weakness but of a deeper, more nuanced humanity—one that continues to resonate across cultural and temporal boundaries.

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