

Literary Acumen of Anita Desai as a Novelist

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ABSTRACT

The Padma Bhushan Awardee novelist Anita Desai is known for her sensitive portrayals of female characters and the delineation of the middle class women in India. Though the concept of feminism does not find favour with her, women in her novels are either the central characters themselves or at least of equal importance with the male characters. Her characters are seen to be lonely individuals, refusing to accept the available value system, shrinking themselves to a world of their own illusions, comfortable assumptions and beliefs. By adopting the method of peeping into the inner tensions and turmoil of the psyche of her characters, she tries to explore their difficulties and problems and alienated individual caught in the crisis of a changing society. The present paper is a humble attempt to give general introduction to Anita Desai's major novels and discusses some of her conspicuous characteristics as a novelist.

KEYWORDS: sensitive, feminism, consciousness, psychological, emotional, fragmented, alienated, violence

INTRODUCTION

Winner of the 1978 Sahitya Academy Award for **Fire on the Mountain**, the 1983 Guardian Prize for children's fiction **Village by the Sea** and twice nominated for the Booker Prize (1980, 1984), Anita Desai received the prestigious **Padma Bhushan Award** of India in 2014. She is unquestioningly one of the outstanding Indo-Anglian novelists like M.R. Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya, R.K. Narayan, Kamla Markandaya and Nayantara Sehgal. Endowed with excellent talents she has been active on the literary scene for over four decades. Her novels have equally attracted the attention of scholars and critics in India and abroad for their sensitive portrayals of female characters and the delineation of the middle class women in India. A keenly observant writer, she has emerged as one of the most widely read Indo-Anglian novelists of today.

Discussion

Anita Desai was born on June 24, 1937 at Mussoorie. She was an offspring of Bengali-German parentage. Most of her early life was spent in Delhi. She attended Queen Mary's school in Delhi and Miranda House, University of Delhi from where she graduated with a B.A. with Honours in English.

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Women in each of her novels occupy a prominent place. They are either the central characters themselves or at least of equal importance with the male characters. But whether or not she should be described as a feminist, she emphatically asserts:

“No, because when I started writing I think that I wasn't even aware of such a concept as feminism. And I don't have much patience with the theory that it's women who suffer. As far as I can see, men suffer equally.”¹

Her notable published works include the following books for children-- **The Peacock Garden** (1973) and **A Cat on a House Boat** (1979), a large number of short stories, some of which have been published in the volume **Games at Twilight** and nine major novels : **Cry, the Peacock** (1963). **Voices in the City** (1965), **Bye-Bye Blackbird** (1971), **Where Shall We Go this Summer?** (1975), **Fire on the Mountain** (1977), **Clear Light of Day** (1980). **In Custody** (1984), **Baumgartner's Bombay** (1988), **Fasting, Feasting** (1999) and **The Zigzag Way** (2004).

Acclaimed as a “trendsetting novel”² and a “poetry novel”³, Desai's very first novel **Cry, the Peacock**, was a great success and first Indian English novel of

unusual distinction. Meena Belliappa, in her study, considers the novel “a remarkable attempt to fuse fantasy with perceptual experience.”⁴ It is a story of a hypersensitive and highly-strung young woman whose insensitive and rational advocate husband fails to understand her sensitive nature. She takes seriously a childhood prophecy, and from the beginning of the novel to its end suffers from mental chaos. Eventually, she kills her husband by pushing him off the parapet of their house and then commits suicide.

Anita Desai's second novel **Voices in the City** (1965), serialized in **The Illustrated Weekly** of India during 1965, is the most varied and intricately woven of her novels. It delineates the miserable plight of an artist, Nirode, and his two sisters, Monisha and Amla, in Calcutta, all the three of them being concerned about finding a path conducive to the development of healthy art. Mrs. Desai unfolds the interaction that takes place between the citizens and the decadent city of Calcutta. The locale of the novel is presented not only as an object or a milieu, but rather as an active agent with, as it was, an obsessive emotional significance.

Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971), her third novel is somewhat less successful attempt in terms of vigour and vitality. Dealing with the theme of cultural encounter between India and England, the novel depicts the lives of Indian immigrants in England. Here cultural memory and the physical landscape of England merge, clash, and merge again in consciousness of the protagonists. This novel, to some extent, is weak regarding probing deep into the mind and heart of her characters, who consequently remain unreal and unconvincing.

The novel **Where Shall We Go This Summer** (1977) is a remarkable delineation of emotional reaction of a sensitive woman Sita who is pessimistic and whimsical and is a victim of the situation she finds herself in.

Fire on the Mountain (1977) which won her the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for fiction in 1978, portrays a female protagonist who has retired into a life of seclusion and loneliness. In this novel, Mrs. Desai seems to suggest that one desiring an escape into complete freedom is bound to meet nothing but disaster.

In Mrs. Desai's early novels, her characters are seen to be lonely individuals, refusing to accept the available value system, shrinking themselves to a world of their own illusions, comfortable assumptions and beliefs. They seem to cherish a desire “to live a painless existence in a world full of pain,”⁵ and that is why they are doomed to suffer.

Her novel **Clear Light of Day** (1980) is the most autobiographical novel. It deals with the theme of quest for togetherness and belongingness. Here she seems to be of the view that though man is basically in exile in this world, his situation is not without redress. The ‘light’ of the title is the light of emancipation, of liberation from darkness of ignorance of oneself and the family of fallen values and dignity encompassing them from generation to generation.

As a narrative of literary and political partitions of the Indian subcontinent, her novel **In Custody** (1984) is concerned with the sensitive theme of the unease that prevailed in Muslim community in contemporary India and the decline of Urdu. The novel shows her first major focus on a male protagonist and his relation to current political and social conditions.

Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) also tells a curious tale, full of silent reactions to the darkness of Hitler's society and grimness of Bombay. Though we come across some of the fine feminine sensibilities and their appreciation of poetry, the primary concern of the novelist remains the chief protagonist Hugo who belongs to Berlin and shows little relationship with Indian character.

Mrs. Desai's novel **The Zigzag Way** (2004) is the first to be located wholly outside India. It is a contemporary ethnographic extravaganza with a multiple narrative. Her newly-developed interest in Mexico finds expression in this novel which is clearly a tribute as much to her six years of travel and retreat in Mexico as to her quiet dedication to her art.

Results

Anita Desai is an eminently psychological novelist. She is primarily preoccupied with an exploration of psychological effects of oppression. In her early novels like **Cry, the Peacock** and **Voices in the City**, she is concerned with the fragmented individual (and usually female). But one must admit that in her later novels like **Where Shall We Go This Summer**, **Fire on the Mountain**, **Clear Light of the Day** and **In Custody** she reveals an increasing interest for social and historical contingency. Here she does not make any attempt to escape from social contradictions, rather explores them.

Anita Desai adds a new dimension to the Indian English novel by primarily depicting the inner world of her novels. She is totally engrossed in the psyche of her protagonists. She explores sensibility and the inner working of the minds of her characters. By adopting the method of peeping into the inner tensions and turmoil of the psyche of her characters, she tries to explore their difficulties and problems and

alienated individual caught in the crisis of a changing society.

Usha Bande, in her book **The Novels of Anita Desai** assesses Mrs. Desai's characters in the light of "Third Force Psychology". She opines that in Mrs. Desai's novels "the conflicts, complexes, defenses and the working of the inner life of characters can be studied in the light of the Third Force Concepts of health or sickness."⁶ She is interested mainly in analyzing Mrs. Desai's skill in characterization. According to her Mrs. Desai's novels generally deal with the psychic turmoil of the characters, who make a quest to find fuller life. These characters may be classified into two distinctive groups- those who fail to adjust to the harsh realities of life and become the "outsiders", only to suffer under a sense of personal inadequacy (e.g. Maya in **Cry, the Peacock**, Nirode and Monisha in **Voices in the City**), and those who finally compromise with life realizing that running away from the mundane reality is not an answer to life (e.g. Amla in **Voices in the City**, Sita in **Where Shall We Go This Summer?**). Sita wishes to escape from the worldly reality of her existence in a bid to discover peace in her childhood home, but finally compromises with life; Bim, in **Clear Light of Day**, is baptized by the divine light of love and forgiveness after a long period of frustration and anger; Deven Sharma in is deceived and trapped but at long last is able to separate art from life, and feel 'whole' despite his shattering experiences.

Cry, the Peacock attempts the delineation of "the diseased psyche of a woman on the brink of insanity"⁷ Maya is seen by her as an imaginative and sensitive girl who asks fundamental questions about life and tries to give meaning from her own experience, which, however, results in insanity. Various symbols and images are used in the novel. Mrs. Belliappa observes that almost every image in the novel has a dual existence and this is at once the strength and the weakness of the novel. Mrs. Desai herself looks upon the book as "pure emotion, pure, uncontrolled, rampant emotion."⁸

Voices in the City, which is set primarily in post-independence Calcutta, is particularly concerned with the articulation of women's stories. All the women characters in the novel are actively and tragically involved in a quest for self fulfilment as women and as human beings in this tradition oriented patriarchal society of India. Meena Belliappa analyses the novel from various stand-points. She notices the delineation of the inner world of individual and its relation to the spirit of a locale for the first time in Indian fiction. She feels that "through the impress of the city on these individuals and their associates, and the

interplay of their particular emotional disturbances is evolved a complex of experience that is Calcutta."⁹

Conclusion

A thorough study of Mrs. Desai's novels and characters reveals that violence has always been and will remain an essential part of human nature--be it internal violence or external violence. Anita Desai makes it her important preoccupation to study the nature and etiology of violence- both inner and outer, psychological and physical. Where whereas the violence in her early novels is predominantly psychological, and affects the attitude of the principal characters towards the outer world that in her later novels is largely physical, and whereas the first kind of violence results from a traumatized mind, the second kind is seen to traumatize the mind.

To conclude, "In her books, Anita has managed to deal with topics ranging from anti-Semitism to western quintessential ideologies of India and the death of Indian traditions and customs. Desai's works deal with contemporary Indian life, culture clashes between the East and the West, generational differences, and practical and emotional exile."¹⁰

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