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## MYRIAD DIMENSIONS OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS' CHARACTER IN ANITA DESAI' S NOVELS

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### Abstract

*Anita Desai is well recognized Indian novelist who has depicted the complete inwardness of the characters. Their sensibility, their inner complexes and tensions, their spiritual crises, their feeling of alienation are some of the problems that engage her creative impulses. These challenges of contemporary urban reality are the concern of the novelist. For her 'the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that clears or rumbles like thunder and suddenly blazes forth like lightning is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action'. The characters in the novels of Mrs. Desai are not superfluous but real ones having flesh and blood, with a good deal of shortcomings and problems quite natural in a modern world. The psychological complexities in the behaviour of her characters, their incessant struggle to find meaning in life and the agonies they feel in their isolation symbolize the concern of modern man with the eternal human situation.*

**Key Words:** psychological complexities, In dividuality, disillusionment

Anita Desai is keen observer of the reality that the modern man is eager to free himself not only from the dangers involved in the arms race, nuclear proliferation, air and sound pollution, but also from the anxiety state, uneasiness, social and mental malaise, the cry of despair, and dread caused by the lack of love and understanding, which would ultimately result in total annihilation of the human race. Anita Desai's art is not conventional. She has limited range and depicts her characters who are engaged in contemplation, not in action. Despite this limitation Mrs. Desai has successfully come out in capturing the attention of her readers by her narrative skill. The presentation of the stories is like Virginia Woolf's beginning from the middle, flashing backwards and forwards revealing the whole story. The intuition, the intensities and the agonies presented by her in her fiction make one move gradually grasping and half-grasping the inherent in inherent suffering in a fast changing word. Her portrayal of characters intends to tell a story with a view to mainly embody her vision of life.

Usha Bande aptly remarks: "Anita Desai's characters reveal her vision of life; they share her perceptions and they set out in quest of meaning. Life their creator they love solitude and privacy" (20).

The protagonists in the novels of Anita Desai are living individuals interested in life with its hopes, dejections and chaotic flow. Nevertheless, the trouble with some of them is that they, at times, take a wrong path and perpetuate their neurosis. Mrs. Desai's critical portraits:

Hypersensitive Maya, Lonely Monisha, rebellious Nirode, bored Sita, discarded Nanda, peculiar Raka, sensitive but balanced Bim; and simple Deven; pass through a state of psychological crises damaging their value system. A close examination of her fiction shows that some of them are lost, while some get out of their alienation. Maya, Monisha, Nirode, Raka and Nanda Kaul are some of those protagonists, who live either in illusion by retreating into fabrication and fantasy or show their reluctance to face reality. They live in self-imposed solitary confinement. During the course of my analysis of Mrs. Desai's fiction I have found that her fictional world of defeat and disillusionment on the one hand, and of compromises and reconciliation on the other. The experience of defeat and disillusionment in her fiction not only leads to agony and suffering but also to an acquiescence of life. There are character who compromise with life- Amla, Sarah, Sita, Bimla Das and Deven. Although they have their conflicts, they manage

to transcend their personal problems. Anita Desai herself asserts:

I don't think anybody's exile from society can solve any problem. I think basically the problem is how to exit in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging, that is why exile has never been my theme. (Interview with Jasbir Jain, 10)

I have found that despite its indifference, filth, dust, noise and crowd, the urban milieu becomes an inescapable part of the artist's perception and vision. Mrs. Desai portrays the present crisis of man's and the enduring human condition' in the perspective of the urban metropolis. As no man's life is an island, man has to exit in society amidst all troubles, pain and suffering. The problem before him is "how to exit," and not "how to exit". Mrs. Desai has faith in life and individuality. Her faith in life is attested by her own statement, though made in different context. She affirms: "If one opts for life one must compromise with it, like Sita, in "Where Shall We Go This Summer?" According to her, "Drawing a line means certain death" (PP. 21-23). Nirode, Amla and Monisha undergo existential crises. They are questers, looking for a proper vocation. Nirode strive to find life in self abnegation, Monisha searches it in privacy, and both fail. But Amla turns to art and realizes that losing one's self is not an answer to life. She decides that she will not allow herself to be lost like her sister Monisha. After all, she is ready to accept the challenges of life, to go through life with her feet. "Primly shod", because her sister Monisha has shown her a glimpse of what lies on the other side of the stark, uncompromising margin" (P.248).

Bimla Das, the chief protagonist of "Clear Light of Day" accepts her present, and linking it with her past, marches ahead towards a bright future forgiving everyone for everything. In Sita and Bimla, there is, at least, a resolution to affirm life. Sita wishes to escape the mundane reality of her existence in a bid to discover peace in her childhood home, but finally compromises with life as it is: "Life must be continued, and all its business Menaka's admission to medical college gained, wife led to hospital, new child safely brought forth, the children reared, the factory seen to, a salary earned, a

salary spent" (PP., 138-139) Bim, too. After a long period of frustration and anger, comes to recognize the importance of an attitude; to forget and forgive. Deven Sharma in "In Custody" is deceived and trapped, yet at long last he is able to separate art from life and feel 'whole' despite his shattering experiences. After a sleepless night, he is able to segregate lived reality from art. The salvation for Deven lies in the aesthetics of life. His everyday life is sufficiently alive to liberate his drive for self-realization. The growing urge for self-discovery in Mrs. Desai's characters, thus, shows the growth potential of her protagonists as also the ever-developing vision of their creator.

The message in "Fire on the Mountain" is only obvious that one must learn "to connect" in order to make one's life meaningful which Nanda Kaul, the chief protagonist of the novel has failed to do. But she does not commit suicide like Maya or Monisha, nor do her neurotic impulses drive her to violent outburst like Nirode. It finally causes her psychic death, followed by sudden physical demise. She has a small spell of self-discovery, but the truth about herself is too bitter to endure. The message the 'Wheel Turns', in "The Village By the Sea" has remained at the very bottom of the novel from the beginning to the end. The novel ends with a number of positive and constructive points. Mr. Panwallah prepares Han to change and accept ways and techniques. He tells Han, "No, boy, they are still changing- they will go on changing- and if you want to survive, you will have to change too. The wheel turns and turns and turns: it never stops and stands still" (129).

With the help of Mr. Panwallah, Han seems to be encouraged and confident. He is prepared to undergo changes in his life. He is prepared to do something concrete for himself and for his family members. Mr. Panwallah's message "the wheel turns" absolutely reminds us of Alfred Tennyson's fruitful line 'the old order changeth yielding place to New'. Anita Desai's feminine sensibility has promoted her to explore that tender area of characters which has been neglected for years in India. Their projection, therefore, marks a new age. "These rebel- victims are not the outcome of an eccentric vision of the author but they are indicative of the emergence if this disquieting stance which modern

literature stands to project”(20). Earlier, a true picture of them has been depicted by Ruth Praver Jhabvala- Beat them, starve them, maltreat them how you like, they will sit and look with animal eyes and never raise a hand to defend themselves.. Mrs. Desai's main occupation in all her novels is, therefore, to explore the emotional life of her individual characters, particularly of her women protagonists, their wounds and agonies, their melancholia and psychosis, and to implicitly suggest the healing remedies to solve this all pervasive human problem. In her novels, as in the novels of Nayantara Shahgal, the crisis is mostly born out of marital discord, a lack of understanding between husband and wife. Modern man is mostly seen in the quest of wealth and economic prosperity and this quest keeps him away from his family for the whole day, even for days together. He aspires for prosperity simply for the sake of social status, prestige and is forced to face marital discords of violent type. In his madness for materialism he subdues the roots of happiness, human compassion and pleasure of life. Modern men, like Gautama or Raman, are aware of money, name and fame but do not think necessary to give time or listen to their wives. As marriage is union of two different minds, some adjustment is bound to be there. But this adjustment should naturally come from both the sides-the husband and the wife.

Maya, Monisha, Sita and Nanda Kaul are all victims of uncaring, loveless husbands. For individual happiness, mere external factors, material comfort and money are not enough. Like physical hunger, the individual also has psychic needs which are no less important. We should try to understand that the women are beings not actually devoid of feelings but in search of a bit of love, and life. Maya might not have been an introvert and a killer or Monisha, a self- destroyer, had they got sympathetic attention of their husbands. Proper understanding of each other, a sense of wisdom and love for each other can play an eminent role in making one's conjugal life successful. We should also be conscious of the fact that man- woman relationship deeply influences the spiritual mental and physical growth of a child. Poor relationship mainly between mother and father pours nothing but frustration and mental conflict over children. Maya, Monisha, Nirode, Sita and Raka are some of those

children who are really the victims of filial bondage Raka doubtlessly the victim of a broken home. The vehicle moves smoothly only when both the wheels are similar in size and shape, properly greased and carefully driven otherwise it is likely to falter and fall down without fail.

During the course of my analysis of Mrs. Desai's fiction I have found that the novels of the great novelist constitute together the documents of radical female resistance against a patriarchally defined concept of normality. Her female protagonists break all familiar relationships the illusory quality of all human relationships, male and female. There is not only a rejection of the passive acceptance of the traditional female role, but also the deeply felt and suffered rebellion against the entire system of social relationship. The tragedy and the sense of isolation in the lives of the protagonists in her novels can be finally traced back to this discord and disparity in sensibilities. The incongruity in such relationships has been obviously depicted in the case of Maya and Gautama in "Cry, the Peacock", Monisha and Jiban in "Voices in the City", Sita and Raman in "Where Shall We Go This Summer?", Nanda Kaul and her Vice-Chancellor husband in "Fire on the Mountain", Bimla Das and her suitor Dr. Biswas in "Clear Light of Day", Anamika and Arvind in "Fasting Feasting". Mrs. Desai's modern female protagonists are in search of their identity, and on the process, both act and react to the set traditional expectations. They are slowly but definitely trying to crack the hard shell. These are the 'new women' of modern society with their modern outlooks. They have not abandoned the traditional image but are evolving it, changing it, improving upon it. They are slowly but surely acquiring the strength to face their lives, to break the customs which so far disabled them. Anita Desai faithfully depicts the dilemma of the modern man, the problems and plights of alienated individuals caught in the crisis of a changing society. She is an artist of a high order, and her concern for human lot has imparted profound appeal to her novels. Arun Joshi's "The Apprentice" is a forward step in echoing the cry of the tortured humanity whose primary aim is to be good and be respected. Each of Mrs Desai's novels tries to tackle the central aesthetic problem of the modern writer the problem of rendering complete human personality, in

an age of lost values, men and lost gods. Almost every novel of Anita Desai touches upon the dreadfulness of the city life. Modern man's desire for wealth and economic prosperity, his madness for materialism in order to gain social status and prestige exhibit only his spiritual emptiness and hollowness.

Anita Desai writes in a secular mode, Multiculturalism and synthesis of various religious groups are her marked qualities. She attacks traditional religious dogma in the form of Maya's belief in the astrologer's predictions about the future of the married couple leading to tragedy in "Cry, the Peacock". Mrs. Desai's multiculturalism and integration of universal religions as visible in her latest novel "Journey to Ithaca" proves that there is no room for hatred, jealousy and religious fanaticism in the world.

Love, sympathy, kindness, forgiveness and fellowship of all human being of any cast and creed are some of those extra-ordinary and divine qualities which can make the earth a paradise. Religion requires love and neighbourhood not Laden, the most wanted terrorist in the form of a devil. Hugo Baumgartner may be killed by an Aryan German but he can not commit suicide or kill anyone. He is a victim of perverted social values and in some respect he is similar to Sarah. If Sarah's predicament is caused by her conscious breaking of social code by marrying a coloured foreigner, Hugo's only crime is that he is born a Jew. Indian society does not accept him because of his colour. He has accepted India as his country but Indian society does not accept him. Even the son of his long-standing friend now dead, treats him insolently. His predicament is caused by perverted sociopolitical values which are summed up by Mrs. Desai in the statement "Accepting—but not accepted"(P.20). He suffers but does not commit suicide.

In "In Custody", the chief protagonist Deven, who is exploited by many, ultimately realizes, as shown in the comment of the author, that he alone can help himself and when all alone he then only realizes his own strength; "Perhaps, when everyone had cut him off and he was absolutely alone, he would begin to find himself

and his own strength" (PP., 189-190). "In Clear Light of Day", Bimla Das compromises with reality in the light of love and understanding. In "Voices in the City", Professor Bose speaks of making concessions to survive; My dear Nirode... one must make concessions- how else one can survive." Similarly, compromise is made by Sita in "Where Shall We Go This Summer?" Anita Desai herself asserts that if one is alive in this world, one cannot survive without compromise. Escapism can never be the solution to a problem. Ila Das in "Fire on the Mountain" not only speaks of accepting things but also of discharging one's duty: "We must do the best we can about it, That's it Isn't it? We must simply shoulder our responsibilities and do what we can"(P.132). Here, Ila's message is more meaningful than Gautama's preaching, for she puts into practice what she speaks. It can be said that shouldering one's responsibility to one's best capability is both one's 'Karma' and 'Dharma'. One survives only when one learns to repair and make adjustments. Mrs. Anita Desai's vision, therefore, seems to be more drawn towards Kierkegaardian line of philosophical faith, a "metaphysic of hope" which is very much akin to Hindu thought that is basically optimistic as in its spirit lies, the concept of "Aa no bhadra kratavo yantu vishwatah (Let all the noble thoughts come to us from every side)."

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