

## IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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### Abstract

The first and foremost aim of this paper is to bring out Identity Crisis in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and *Fire on the Mountain*. The second chapter deals with the Identity Crisis in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. In this novel the characters who try to know their self are portrayed accordingly. The third chapter deals with the Identity Crisis in *Fire on the Mountain*. It describes the characters of the novel and how they suffer under the Identity Crisis. The Indian novel in English is thus characterized by a variety of themes and techniques. It continues to change and grow and adapt itself to the changing Indian environment. Social, Political, Technological and Industrial changes have brought corresponding changes in its substance. However, in the field of characterization the Indian novelist in English has not been quite so successful. With some expectations, his characters continue to be stereotypes. Desai explores the intricate facts of human experience of psychic tensions of her characters. Her chief concern is human relationship. Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual, which she projects through incompatible couples-very sensitive wives and ill-matched husbands. This paper attempts to show how they achieve the results they seek to gain in order to expose not only the extremity of the suffering endured by women but also the deep psychological problems that beset many human beings

**Keywords:** Predicament - difficult situation, immigrants- new comer, psychic – supernatural, self-alienation – mental illness.

### Introduction

This chapter gives an account of the growth of Indo-Anglian Literature. The term "Indo Anglian" was first used to denote the original literary creation in the English language by Indians. Today there are a large number of educated Indians who use English as a medium of creative exploration and expression of their experience of life. Their writing has now developed into a substantial body of literature in its own right and it is that literature which is now referred to as Indian English Literature. Indians began to use English for creative expression much before Macaulay's Minutes on Education (1830) and the implementation of his policy on English education. The novel, the short story and the drama were practically non-existent in the Indian language before the middle of the century. With the introduction of English in India, there was a spurt of translations, and a number of English Classics were soon translated into various Indian languages, and Indian writers were inspired by these translations. The critics and creative writers in the Indian languages have generally been hostile towards Indo-Anglian fiction. The Indo-Anglian writer, on the other hand, enjoys access to a large number of readers both inside and outside India. Indian English literature fiction is compared favorably with the greatest literatures of the world.

Now in India particularly within the last three decades a large number of Indian English literature novelists have attracted a great deal of attention and favorable comment. Novelists like Dr. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandeya, Mrs. Desai and her daughter

Kiran Desai have produced novels which have evoked an enthusiastic response from critics inside and outside India.

Today the Indian novelists writing in English are large in number. Besides Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan the three foremost Indian writers of fiction in English, there are also K. Nagarajan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Kushwant Singh, Balachandra Raju, Kamala Markandeya and Anita Desai. All these novelists and many more have considerably enriched Indo-Anglian fiction.

The Indian novels made such a late start because, in the beginning, it had to face a number of peculiar problems. One of the most difficult problems that had to be faced was the problem of language. Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao have achieved it successfully. Other Indian novelists in English have solved and are trying to solve this problem in their own ways. Another peculiar problem that faces the Indian novelist in English is that of creating an Indian consciousness. The themes of loneliness, rootlessness, the exploration of the psyche and the inner self have been dealt with by Anita Desai, in her two novels, *Cry, The Peacock* and *Voices in the City* and by Arun Joshi in his *The Foreigner*.

The term Identity Crisis was coined by Erik Erikson the psychologist. It is an important conflict that every human being encounters when he/she goes through eight development stages in life. This is a quality, which everyone emerges to find himself/herself.

### Identity Crisis in Bye-Bye Black Bird

Writing novels about one's own country on the basis of memory have been a great challenge for a number of exiled or immigrant writers. Anita Desai is a powerful and persuasive voice among the Indian novelists who cut off from their ethnic roots. A close study of Desai's works reveals her struggle for female autonomy played out against the backdrop of the patriarchal cultural pattern.

"Her protagonists ..... are constantly confronted with the stupendous task of defining their relation to themselves and to their immediate human context."(Mehta: 1999:36)

In Bye Bye Blackbird Anita Desai deviates from her earlier theme of the treatment of the psychic tumult of her self-afflicted characters. In this novel she deals with the tropical problem of adjustment faced by black immigrants in England. She raises this problem portraying the situations of three different characters Dev, Adit and Sarah by exploring the effect of racial hatred on their sensibility.

To sum up, all the three leading characters in Anita Desai's novel face identity crisis. It is self-alienation of these characters that is brought to focus in the novel. The characters, we find, are forced to manipulate in accordance with the social demands. Desai places her characters in certain delicate human situations and they embark on self-analysis. They make self-discovery and very often find themselves alienated. Many a time they travel through a world of fantasy in order to come to terms with the reality of the situations.

Adit's nostalgia acquires a dreadful dimension of an illness, an ache in him. It begins, it suffocates then it makes him to feel fed up with the life in England. He admits to his friend... sometimes it stifles me this business of always hanging together with people like ourselves all wearing the label Indian immigrant, never daring to try and make contact outside this circle," he is herself like an existentialist. He comes top and considers himself a stranger. He moves about in London in a kind of morbid, search for belonging but London appears to be altogether different: he simply could not recognize his workday, weary London as his once- golden Mecca. He took to tramping it after office hours in a kind of morbid search. Ultimately Adit decides to return to India with his wife Sarah. The crisis of identity among the major characters lasts longer and they are not in a position to take immediate decision as what to do.

### Identity Crisis in Fire on the Mountain

A highly imaginative work of literature would always offer diverse interpretations, as regards to its purport, by a critical reader. And Anita Desai's novel Fire on the

mountain too belonged to such a category. It is one of the few examples in Indo- Anglian fiction which succeeds in sustaining the readability despite any attempt to bring in much of either the fascinating or shocking elements in the narrative.

Throughout the novel there is very little action and most of the narrative encompasses the minute details of the surroundings in the form of birds, trees, sounds, landscape etc. But the writer, it seems, has the factor of human relationship to be focused in its myriad manifestations within the range of the few main characters involved in the story. This article is an attempt to examine the intricacies of the nature and extent of the attitude and relationship among these characters

Fire on the mountain, which won the SahityaAkademi Award and the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, is the story of three female characters who live in a Cocoon like existence in the Shimla hills of Kasauli. There is Nanda Kaul, her fragile recalcitrant great granddaughter, Raka and her childhood friend Ila Das. Though all the three have interest on a physical plane yet they live in separate worlds of their own. They make feeble attempts to build bridges of understanding among themselves but cannot go too far. Each has a separate individuality. Each wants to be left undisturbed. The great need of Nanda Kaul is exactly what Nanda's daughter Asha fails to realize. She takes for granted her mother's delight at a prospective companion. Nanda struggles hard to suppress her anger, disappointment and total loathing of her daughter's meddling busybody ways. Nanda Kaul does not want to be drawn into the world. She has left behind, to bow again, to let the noose slip. Once more round her neck that she had thought was freed fully. She silently questions herself at this threat to her freedom, her heart cries out.

"Have I not done enough and had enough.

I want no more. I want nothing.

Can I not be left with nothing?"

(Fire on the Mountain, P.No.17)

At the end of the novel, Anita Desai comes to such stage Raka has bolted towards the forest with a box of matches. Here it is irresistible to compare a parallel situation in a poem. SahirLudhianavi, an Urdu poet, makes the protagonist of his poem, a sensitive poet having long suffered at the hands of the stronger and "prestigious" members of the society, crosses the limits of tolerance for false traditions, sham friendship and disloyalty and he explodes with; Jala Do IseHoshWhloYehDuniya! (Men with reason! Burn

downthis world). The same statement is endorsed by Anita Desai through the seemingly puzzling last act of Raka.

The crisis in human values is highlighted by Anita Desai in the blatant way, Nanda's husband, the Vice-chancellor of Punjab university is totally uncaring about his wife's feelings. He merely used her as a necessary adjunct to his status, keeping her respondent in silks and Jewels. He would make her sit at the big rosewood table entertaining his guests.

This anguish works at the sub-conscious level. For the final act of Raka, a compact metaphor takes shape. The proud and tall trees forest on the hills look down upon the humble earth like the transgressing male. Raka, however, gets hold of an image and has the temerity to act boldly. She burns them down. The trees would revert back to the earth rendered into ashes to the earth from where they had originated and obtained sustenance. The ashes would then bring a sense of equality and mutual respect. The woman of future -the child Raka -offers the message of Anita Desai to the next generation whose mothers, sisters and daughters had so far been subjected to gross organized injustice and exploitation as they considered themselves too weak to resist the male offenders.

### Conclusion

Anita Desai's novels are pre-occupied with the inner feelings of the characters. Most of his characters undergo severe psychological feelings which in the end profess something unexpected and even unpredictable. Anita Desai was rightly called the Indian Virginia Woolf for she introduced the stream of consciousness' technique in Indian soil.

In the novels *Bye Bye Blackbird* and *Fire on the Mountain* the protagonists Adit and Nanda Kaul undergo serious psychological feelings, which ultimately results in the identity crisis of the same. Both the characters are not satisfied with their state of being. This is because they had been forced to such. The women in Desai's novels are stilled to silence. They go through the amorphous existences with sealed lips groaning inwardly with self-pity and pain. The portrayal of human relationships husband and wife, parent and children, is a dominant concern in Desai's novels. The husband- wife relationship is sour and disgusting. Desai's protagonists turn the whole face of romance upside down.

Desai's characters, Maya, Monisha, Nanda, and Sita are quite dissatisfied in their matrimonial relationships. Desai's women face tension on account of the tensions generated by the discord between the individual and the surroundings. Sita cannot adjust to the violence and other harsh realities of life. In Anita Desai's novels woman who lies or who is silent may not lack a language but she does not communicate. Desai's women often fail to communicate and resort to silence. a silence which is often misunderstood by men as the symbol of contentment. *Cry, the Peacock* is a novel mainly concerned with the theme of disharmony between husband and wife relationship. This novel's theme of which may be described as an incompatible marriage with the focus on the heroine's psyche. Her second novel *Voices in the City* is a novel about a family and the influence of the city of Calcutta on the three characters of the family, namely, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. Desai's novels are not sociological phenomenons rather it is psyche. She sets herself seriously to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of married women. These women are tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments. Desai reveals a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and finds a profound understanding of work and finds a profound understanding of women sensibility.

More or less all the characters discussed above suffers from the listed. It is obvious that one could find a clear note of identity crisis in the characters of the protagonists as well as in other characters in *Bye Bye Blackbird* and *The Fire on the Mountain*.

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