
Wounds Within: Psychological Stress in Anita Desai's Novels

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Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the most renowned Indian English writers of the postcolonial era. Her contribution to the Indian English literature is fabulous, and so her fame as a literary icon has spread far and wide. It is interesting that she deliberately touches various issues of human life, both rural and urban through her innovative approach. The objective of this research paper is to examine the psychological traumas reflected in the following novels of Anita Desai: *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Where Shall We go This Summer* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and *Clear Light of the Day* (1980) which are the major literary recognitions. Her novels explore the story of those families that survive a period of extreme circumstances and psychological trauma. She points out a number debatable issue in the society through her novels. Her strong emphasis on the complexities of human existence along with remarkable techniques seems to have contributed immensely to the success of her novels. The characters like Maya, Monisha, Sita, Nanda and Vimla in her novels unfold a new vista through the portrayal of their sufferings. She tries to project the agony and predicament of women in a male dominated society.

Keywords: male dominated society, sufferings, superstitions, traditions, psychological revolt.

Introduction

Indian English fiction has several writers who eminently star in the galaxy of fiction world. In the post –independence era Anita Desai, Kamala Marakandeya, and Ruth Praver Jhabwala enjoy popularity of their own. Among them Anita Desai is one of the best-known contemporary women writers of Indian fiction in English. Born to a Bengali father and a German mother, she is an excellent example of the bicultural heritage of postcolonial India. She grew up in Delhi, receiving her education first at Queen Mary's School and later at Miranda House, one of Delhi University's most prestigious colleges. Starting to write at the early age of seven, she published her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* in 1963. This

work immediately established her as a major voice in Indian literature in English. Since then, she has steadily published novels, short stories, and children's literature.

Well versed in more than half a dozen languages, Anita Desai has always preferred to write in the English language. In *Cry, the Peacock*, she delves into the mind of a hypersensitive young urban wife, Maya, who finds herself, coupled with the ascetic Gautam, a man given to abstraction and philosophy. Discovering that the poetic, creative, and romantic side of her own personality is easily rejected by the patriarchal society of which her husband is an emblem, the disturbed young woman quickly slips into insanity. Desai's instinctive perception of the female psyche characterizes many of her novels and establishes her as a writer with an unusual feminine sensibility. Her next novel, *Voices in the City*, encompasses the author's experiences in the city of Calcutta, represented in the novel as a locus of wealth and poverty, light and darkness. The central characters, again displaced figures, find their own complexities reflected in the chaotic waters of urban Calcutta. Then, moving away from the locale of the Indian city to the English world, the author found new inspiration in the conflicts generated by racial tensions between the Indian immigrants and the postcolonial white population of England. In *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, Desai captures the immigrant's dilemma on strange, new soil in the image of the blackbird. Nostalgia and alienation, rejection and acceptance of the colonizer's identity, are dualities deftly braided together in this work of East-West tensions and oppositions. In 1975, her award-winning novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* was published. Again, Desai returns to her concern with the situation of the middle-class Indian wife in a contemporary urban setting.

Even before the likes of Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy ushered in new possibilities for Indian-English writers and paved way for their recognition in the global map, there was Anita Desai, one of India's foremost writers. Indian novelist, short-story writer and children's author, Anita Desai is indeed a name to count with in the field of literature.

Emotions and feelings with political and social realities is fort of her writings. For her, writing is "an effort to discover and then to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of things". (1) She was born on June 24, 1937 in Mussoorie, India and has thrice been shortlisted for the Man Booker prize for fiction. In 1978, she was awarded with a *Sahitya Academy Award* for her novel *Fire on the Mountain*. For the novel *The Village by the Sea*, she received the 1983 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. Although she aspired to be a writer right from her childhood, she was recognized as an established author of worldwide recognition only after the independence. She presents the complexities of the life of women at the cruel hands of fate in the contemporary society.

Anita Desai's fine creation Maya passes through a peculiar psychic experience and suffers from failures, frustrations and depressions. They undergo traumas because of their hypersensitive nature and their insensitive husbands. Most of her characters are either women with prosperous background or are mere housewives. Women in her novels suffer endlessly due to the restriction of the society. Consequently, they react silently and sometimes violently. In the novel *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya behaves abnormally in her later life because of her father's excessive care. She gets married to Gautam, a middle aged lawyer. He is insensitive to the desires of her young wife, and so she feels lonely, isolated, frustrated, alienated and bears this brunt silently. The differences between their ages make a wide gorge between them. Gautama, the male protagonist, is busy in his profession and has no time to spend with her.

Childless couple faces a severe criticism in Indian society. Maya of *Cry, the Peacock* is still childless after four years of marriage. She gets attached to her pet dog, Toto. She cares for the pet as a mother does. She gets inconsolable when her pet Toto dies. Its death breaks her badly and causes an emotional upheaval in her life; on the other hand her husband is insensitive to her condition. She attributes the relationship to the dog as "no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child" (2). Childless woman gets attached to it and Gautam's indifference to the pet makes Maya neurotic which makes her condition worse. When Gautam does not pay attention, she gets highly reactive and violent. Toto's death makes her restless and it makes a series of reactions. Gautam's involvement in his profession leads to her agony as she had a protective life under her father. She is unable to make an adjustment between her inner self and the realities of the outer world. Her tragedy further worsens as she recalls the prophecy made by albino astrologers that in the fourth year of their marriage either she or her husband will expire. This childhood prophecy is deep-rooted in her mind, and as a result of it she remains restless and violent. The lack of harmonious relation creates rift and difference between them.

Maya is a lady who has much leisure time. She is still childless. It gives rise to her frustration, and she becomes psychic. Depression resulting from loneliness makes their relation inconsistent. She wants Gautam to love her and spare time for her. Gautam advises her to be busy in household works as detachment leads to self-destruction. Both have different views of life, and they are not ready to make compromise with their views. Maya is governed by childhood prophecy of an astrologer. It makes her hypersensitive. Maya wishes to live on, but the fear of death always haunts her. She says:

“The man who had no contact with the world, or with me, what would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact? What would it matter to him? It was I, who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror” (3).

Anita Desai thinks that Maya’s plight is severe paradox of love and death. It is Gautam’s detachment from Maya and Maya’s detachment for more involvement in life leads to the killing of her husband. Maya must love to exist as peacocks do, and like peacocks again, she must tear the mate and be torn by him. Maya thinks that her husband Gautam is the cause of her sufferings. She becomes psychic and miserable. M.K. Naik opines:

Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is obsessed with death and haunted by an astrological prediction that her marriage is going to end in its fourth year, with the death of either wife or husband. She can establish no effective communication with her husband, who is unsentimental, matter-of-fact and twice her age. There are no children of the marriage and this accentuates Maya’s isolation, which becomes total when she murders her husband in a fit of insane fury. The symbolism of the peacock, whose ‘dance of joy is the dance of death’ has however, no adequate relevance to Maya’s plight (4).

In the novel *Voices in the City* (1965), Anita Desai paints the psychological trauma of a woman, Monisha. She is a highly dignified woman who reads Kafka and Camus. Unfortunately, she got married in a conservative Hindu joint family which is completely beyond her standard. There is no mutual understanding and love between husband and wife. It is not possible for her to have privacy in the joint family. Her husband advises her to keep herself busy in domestic work like kitchen and be friendly with the members of his family. Consequently, she passes her whole time in cutting vegetables, cooking, serving food and brushing small children’s hair. It becomes very difficult for her to make communication with her husband. She feels: “is this life is then, my life only a conundrum that I shall brood over for ever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a station? Only a conundrum is that, then life?” (5)

Infertility issue of Monisha becomes a topic of discussion in her family. They talk very lightly about her sterility and discuss whether her fallopian tubes are blocked or her wombs need an operation. Monisha knows why they are discussing about her organs and her inability to conceive.

Monisha suffers from a terrible sense of alienation. Her husband Jiban is practical, down to earth and is an essentially mediocre. She has to suffer the slings and arrows of the taunts and tortures of the joint family. She hates her work as she does not leave time to look after her brother. Monisha gets worse and worse when she is charged by her mother in law of stealing money from the husband’s cupboard. She charges that she should not take money without her husband’s permission. She takes money to pay

the hospital bill of his brother Nirod. She feels disappointed that a lady does not have right to use her husband's money. What to think of others, even her husband does not support her. She feels humiliated as her mother-in-law's words are piercing. She understands that her life is futile and meaningless by depending on others.

Monisha, like Maya, becomes a victim of the situation. M.K. Naik comments:

Nirode and his two sisters, Monisha and Amla are rebels against the stolid conventions of middle class life and long for creativity and self-expression. Each comes to grief: Nirode ends up as a drifting bohemian, Monisha commits suicide and Amla is heart-broken when her love is rejected. Her suicide is confession of failing. She does not accept that a woman is a slave in a man's life. She takes a bad decision that death is better than existence. Her last words are significant: "I am turned into a woman who keeps a diary. I do not like a woman who keeps a diary. Priceless meaningless uninvolved, does this not amount to non-existence. Please? (6).

Monisha searches for silence in the great metropolis, Calcutta, the city of goddess kali. She faces the facets of Calcutta "one rapacious, one way". The garden of Kalimpong is Monisha's abode of peace into which she escapes through memory to forget violence, the crowd and lack of privacy in Calcutta. She feels death like stillness in the city and thinks about Kalimpong, the district away from the city and the family. Her existence in the house and lack of communication with her husband draws her towards an inner garden created by her. She feels that life is monotonous and, therefore, she struggles for her existence.

Desai's "*Where shall We Go This Summer?*" realistically paints the stressed story of a young couple. Raman is a busy factory owner who belongs to an upper middle class. He always remains busy and has no time for her. She is fed up with him, his business and surroundings. Her lack of love brings her on the verge of insanity. Unfortunately, she has been a neglected child and the same environment takes place with her husband. She has four children and is expecting her fifth child. At this stage, a husband is expected to take care of her. She feels disappointed because of his ignorance. As a result of escapism, their relationship traps in difficulties. She becomes psychic and starts smoking to release tension. She takes a decision to go to Manori Island to keep her child unborn. The protagonist Sita is sick of everything and expresses her resentment through smoking and abusing her children on trivial matters. Her husband's colleagues and visitors appear to her: "Nothing but appetite ... Animals" (7).

There are many causes which intensify her sense of alienation and quest for identity. Actually, she tries to escape from her duties. It is ridiculous that a pregnant woman is leaving for an unreal place.

Desai deals with the entry of Sita into the island after living a “life [that] was a crust of tedium, of hopeless disappointment” (8). When she understands the reality, she makes up her mind to return home. She learns the hard realities of life and compromises with it. She accepts the authority of the society and leads life with courage and patience. Unlike Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock*, Sita comes out of her unreal world. Maya always thinks of her childhood prophecy on the other hand Sita realizes her mistake and make a compromise with her family. She does not follow the patch of suicide like other characters.

The novel *Fire on the mountain* explores the human psyche to its deepest depths. Nanda kaul, the protagonist is a wife, mother and grandmother who spends her life for the welfare of her family. Every woman who marries has to follow responsibility of her household, husband and children. She ignores her desires, crushes ambitions and sacrifices her friends and relatives, etc and merges with the family, losing her identity. Her trauma as a housewife is presented in the novel by Anita Desai as:

...the old house, the full house, of that period of her life she was the vice-chancellor's wife and at the hub of a small but intense busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled ...too many trays of tea would have to made and carried to her husband duty. To her mother –in-law's bedroom, to the veranda that was the gathering –place for all, at all times of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after (9).

Nanda's husband was the vice-chancellor of the Punjab University. Her relationship with her husband was scarred because of his extra marital relationship with Miss Davidson, a member of the teaching staff. He married her only for the efficient running of his family. Although she enjoyed the comfort and dignity of the wife, yet she felt neglected and isolated. She brought up her children and provided the required attention which is expected from a mother. Her trauma can be described in these lines:

“Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen. He had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss David... and her children were all ...I (Desai, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*. London: Penguin Book, 1977). Actually to her natureshe did not live here by choice... She lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing”. (10)

In fact, Nanda Koul looks free from problem but internally she burns with a fire of frustration. Her husband Mr. Koul would invite Miss Davidson to play badminton and compel her to stay at night. He then would secretly enter her room ... “After the death of her husband she has been so glad when it was over ... discharge me' have discharged all my duties” (11).

She could not enjoy the life of motherhood because of pain and agony which she regularly faced with him. She could hardly be devoted to her children because of the family environment as a result of which they were not attached to her. Trees, gardens, birds, season and hills symbolize hope and freshness as well the utter reality of existence. Even the title of the novel carries the same symbolic undertones. 'Fire' signifies the symbol of the masculine mentality. Moreover, it burns out the feminine sensibility. 'Fire' denotes many meanings related to Nanda. It stands for a strong will of recognition and breaks the chain of society by choosing a solitary life. Thus 'Fire' symbolizes self-respect.

The story of the novel *Clear Light of Day* develops with the stream of consciousness of the two main characters Bimla and Tara. Bimla takes her life as an adventure and sacrifices whole life for the sake of her autistic brother Baba. She is both heroine and also a rebel. Her younger sister Tara has escaped from the house by marrying Bakul. Raja, her elder brother has left the family by marrying Hyder Ali Sahib's daughter who is the owner of their house. Tara and her family have come to attend Raja's daughter Manya's marriage. But Bimla is not willing to attend the wedding as she hates him.

Bimla is completely shattered as her condition is, like old Delhi, unchanged. Her house is not painted and she remains rigid, strict and spinster all through the years. This shows her psychic state. In her discussion with Tara, she says: "changed? How? You mean the house newly painted, the garden newly painted, new people coming and going? Oh no how could I, Bim?"(12)

Not like the novelist's other heroines like Maya, Sita, Monisha and Nanda, Bimla herself is an inspiration for those women who compromise with their self-esteem. She decides not to marry because she is not a timid and submissive woman. She cannot live without love for her brothers Baba and Raja:

She saw how she loved him, loved Raja and Tara and all of them who had lived in this house with her. There could be no love more deep and full and wide than this one, she knew. No other love had started so far back in time and had had so much time in which to grow and spread. They were really all parts of her, inseparable, so many aspects of her as she was of them" (13).

Bimla wanted to be Florence Nightingale and John of Arc. Both these figures signify sacrifice, kindness and social work. Among her God and Goddess, she worshipped them. She suffers when both Raja and Tara left her alone and married and settled down for their own interests. She has to live alone with her younger brother Baba who is mentally retarded. She felt disturbed because of a Byronic hero in her brother and the death of a Florence nightingale in her. She thinks that her brother Raja and sister Tara are ungrateful to her. She says: "They had come like mosquitoes – Tara and Bakul and behind them the Misras, and Benazin only to torment her and mosquito like, sip for blood." (14)

Anita Desai as a novelist is morbid. She does not have a sense of humour and irony, and as a result of three things, her style begins with rhetorical flourish and ends in stereotyped clichés. She projects the inner conflicts of the women protagonist fighting against the odds. Her stories not only reflect the worlds of the women but also search for their solutions.

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