

Women and Their Behaviour in Anita Desai's Works

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ABSTRACT

Desai's novels present an interesting panorama of human relationships. Most of her characters display neurotic quantities, the origin of which may be traced back to their early lives. Sometimes her characters seem to be aggressive, sometimes they show regressive behaviour, and still at other times they show displayed aggressiveness. Ultimately most of them develop neurotic qualities which prove unfortunate, even fatal, in some cases. The most important aspect of Desai's characterisation is the depiction of the gradual of their neurosis. It is interesting to see her characters talk in the third person narrative and to trace the graph of the slow psycho-physiological changes in their activities affecting their relationships with other human beings. Anita Desai slots in, in her novels, themes like the agony of existence, the metaphysical void and the fears and trembling of her protagonists. The bond of human relationships goes on changing with changes in moods and circumstances. Each word and action of a person in love reveals the depth of the resounding vale of his heart strengthening, thereby the existing bond of relationship. The existence of unfavourable circumstances results into psychic imbalance and thus retardation; psychological crisis of some characters damage their powers of analysis and reasoning; therefore some characters have to struggle for wholeness and unification. Analysis of such characters will reveal their minds, the reasons of sensitivity, undesirable behaviour and the change in relationships.

INTRODUCTION

This paper endeavours to analyse human relationships, with respect to female characters, in some of Desai's works like, *Cry, the Peacock* (1968), *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).

Desai's characters belong to middle and upper classes. The reason is very simple. She saves herself the trouble of writing dialogues of the lower crest of the society. In her works, we see the clash of cultures; the East-West conflicts; drunken callousness and to some extent partition. She creates a world of characters which has a form and chromes of its own. Through the technique of contrast, she displays the maladjustment in post-marital life of people who got together but belonged to different cultures and ideologies.

One of her characters, Sita, '...still wandered in the memoirs of her father's magic island where she had passed her childhood witnessing the dignity, the mystery and the ascetic splendour of her fabled father.' (Jasbir Jain).

Desai's works show that she completely understands and follows feminine thoughts, feelings, emotions, flaws and strong points. Nobody writes better feminine thoughts and delicacies than Anita Desai.

DESAI AND HER WOMEN

Desai's women question the image of women as a sacrificing wife, a questioning daughter and a doting mother and seek to create an identity of their own. Almost all female characters belong to the upper class of society and are highly emotional and sensitive. They are not ready for any type of adaptation, surrender, acceptance and

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resignation which are a necessity for a peaceful life. They are not average and have not retreated from general current of life, but they are not satisfied with the existing pattern of society. They do not want to accept values of society.

Therefore, Sita wants to end all her relations with family and society and escapes to an imaginary island in order to get identity, satisfaction and peace. Nanda also adopts an escapist attitude and lives alone at Carignano. Even when her great granddaughter arrives she feels disturbed because she may have to again develop a new relationship.

But this escapist attitude brings them only despair and a label of being 'morbid' for Monisha, 'mad' for Sita, 'crazy ones' for Nanda and Rekha and 'dominating and stubborn' for Bim.

All characters are in quest for identity and belongingness. They do not want to submit meekly and play submissively the role they are assigned. In order to create their identity they are even ready to abstain themselves from all walks and aspects of life and lead a solitary life.

On the other hand, all women protagonists are deeply attached with their families and they seek love of their family members. They are impatient to hear that they are loved and cared by their family members, but after fulfilling all their responsibilities when they are neglected they feel dejected and deserted and adopt a rebellious attitude. The reason is they do not want to beg for love and recognition from their husbands and family members. Instead of begging around, they prefer to loveless life. As Monisha in *Voices in the City* immolates herself and Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* also dies.

Sita in a novel '*Where Shall we go this Summer*'? does not want to confine herself to the role of an ideal mother, wife and daughter-in-law; so she escapes to Manori Island.

Similarly 'Nanda Kaul' in *Fire on the Mountain* has during her full life fulfilled the role of Vice Chancellor's wife and brought up her children; but she always felt

incomplete, always found herself in quest for self-identity. 'Monisha' also in '*Voices in the City*' is not happy in her role of an ideal wife, daughter-in-law or mother.

The most important factor in almost all Desai's works is respect for the institution of marriage and love. In spite of her character's quest for self-identity for which they even attempted to escape, there is no advocacy of breakup of marriage. All suicides, murder, resignation were desperate attempts and all are authentically motivated actions of women desperately looking for few moments of life for themselves alone.

There is another factor common in the characters of Desai, when they feel dejected they stop all communications with others. They prefer silence and secrecy in place of sharing their views and feelings with others. This snapping of communication is mainly due to incompatibility of the temperaments. This very factor became lethal for some of Desai's characters who ended up in a tragic manner.

On the other hand 'Sita', 'Amla' and 'Bim' come out of their crisis because they communicated and interacted with people around them and found the solution for their problems. But 'Monisha' and 'Nanda' never tried to communicate. They preferred alienation and detachment and therefore their end was tragic. Here it seems that Desai's message is clear and loud that solution to all problems can be achieved through communication and interaction and not through alienation and detachment.

Whatever trauma these characters go through is because of their hyper-sensitive nature. Had these women checked themselves and their sensitivity, they would not have suffered and their destiny would have been different, as their counterparts (males) had.

The relationship between man and woman in Desai's works is unsuccessful. The main reason is difference between the temperaments and attitudes of both man and woman characters. Men in Desai's novels are practical and insensitive. They accept the ever changing values and attitudes of society and do not find fault with them. They are unimaginative and materialistic in their outlook.

They are unable to understand feelings and emotions of their counterparts.

Had Desai's characters followed the maxim of adopting and making bridges of understanding and connect positively to society instead of withdrawing from it, they would not have suffered so much. It is only when they come out from theory of detachment, they gain meaning in life. Sita ends up her differences with her husband and realised that not 'separateness' but 'togetherness' is universal. Bim also gives her old grudges, bitterness, hatred and dislike and sorts satisfaction in being a sustaining mother to her brother Baba.

CONCLUSION

Quest for Identity is the major problem in contemporary world, so is the theme of almost all the novels written by Anita Desai. In this modern society the same problem is

faced by the women as is faced by the characters of Anita Desai. These characters feel that society has double standards and to some extent they are right. Values and attitude of society are different for 'Male' and 'Female'.

All her works show her "depth in human nature by depicting the gradual conversion of a trait into a psychic block which assumes the form of a disease, making her characters neurotic" (B. Ram Chandra Rao).

Anita Desai has given a new direction to the Indo-Anglian novel which, till her arrival on the scene, revolved round the physical or outer weather of the characters. She did not accept the importance of the socio-economic, patriotic and reformatory themes. A story imposed from the outside according to Anita Desai herself, simply destroys their life, and reduces them to a string of jerking puppets on a stage. Her novels distinctly reveal her views about inadequate human relationships in the society.

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