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Anita Desai: : Prominent Indian Feminist Novelist, 20th Century

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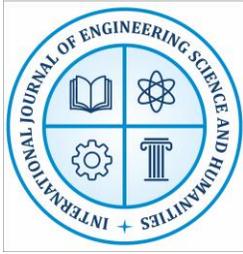
ABSTRACT

Anita Desai stands as a prominent voice in 20th-century Indian feminist literature, known for her profound exploration of the inner lives of women. Her novels intricately portray themes of identity, alienation, emotional conflict, and the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures in Indian society. Through works such as *Cry, the Peacock*, *Fire on the Mountain*, and *Clear Light of Day*, Desai delves into the psychological dimensions of her female protagonists, highlighting their struggles for selfhood and autonomy. Unlike overtly political feminist writing, her approach is subtle and introspective, emphasizing mental landscapes over external action. Her narrative style blends realism with poetic sensitivity, making her contribution distinctive in Indian English literature. Desai's work not only reflects the socio-cultural realities of her time but also offers a universal understanding of gendered experiences, thereby establishing her as a significant feminist literary figure.

Keywords: Anita Desai, Feminism, Psychological Realism, Women's Identity, Indian English Literature

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, is one of the major second generation Indian-English novelists, who breaks a new ground in the world of Indian-English fiction, by shifting the emphasis from the external to the internal world, born in Mussoorie in 1937, of a Bengali father and a German mother. She accepted in her interview that her roots are divided because of the Indian soil on which she grew and the European culture which she inherited from her mother. Anita Desai received her early education at Queen Mary's school, Delhi. Later, she studied in Miranda College, University of Delhi, and completed her graduation in English literature (1957) as she accepted in an interview "Ever since, literature has seemed to me more interesting more significant and overwhelming than the real world", p.18 and in 1958 she married Ashvin Desai, a business executive. They settled in Bombay and Anita Desai has served as a visiting fellow (1986) and visiting professor (1987) in many colleagues and universities. She has won several awards including in 1977, 'The Royal Society of Literature' is Winifred Holtby memorial prize for "Fire on the mountain" and 1978 'Sahitya Akademi Award' for literature in English. Besides many sparkling novels she wrote for children, teenagers, a collection of short stories, a few essays, articles, interviews and uncollected short stories. Desai is a painter also, she was very found of reading books since her childhood and this habit encouraged her for creative writing at the early age. (age of seven).



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She was influenced, she states "It was D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Proust that influenced me more strongly, Latterly, the novels of the Japanese writer Kawanata and more and more, modern poetry- particularly that of Rimbold, Hopkins and Lawrence by India" and "Ruth Prover Jhabvala, as a person, not as a writer", p.19. Anita Desai states that it "has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for writing of such novels"

Anita Desai accepts that "The imagination is an active element in a writer" but "writing is an intellectual exercise". Asked by Srivastava in her interview, about the subjective element "Do you also believe that a writer must have suffered a good deal in order to write, serious writing."

Anita Desai is considered as a first psychologist novelist in Indian- English fiction, as her more emphasis on "inner action". Madhusudhan Prasad feels that "Desai delves deep into human psyche and tries to explore very adroitly the dim domain of the conscious and sub- conscious of the major characters in her novels", p.22. Anita Desai states that 'all her writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things.' Thus Desai spotlights an extremely complex nature of life. Her notion of reality of life seems to have been greatly influenced by Virginia Woolf who maintains that "Life is not a series of big lamps symmetrically arranged: life is a luminous halo, a semi- transparent envelope surroundings us....

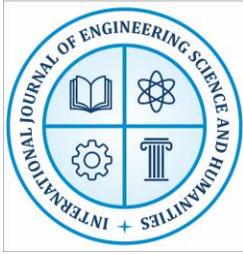
Desai characters come from real life. She herself speaks of the origin and development of some characters in her novels. She says: "Ila Das in 'Fire on the Mountain' was a woman my mother knew and who occasionally visited our house in Delhi, causing much hilarity and scorn amongst us. Later, when I was in Kasauli, I remembered her violent death in a nearby village. When I wrote the book about Kasauli, she entered it as if she were a part of the landscape, a ghost I had not planned to introduce but who entered it silently and secretly, without being asked of course, other characters are more consciously created.", p.24

Thus generally minor characters are taken from real life whom she met and noticed on the other hand, big characters is a mixture of imagination and experience, besides it all the city she delineates in her novels remain her visiting place, as her husband a business executive.

Meena Belliappa in her book on Anita Desai's novels refers to 'The sanner half of Maya where the author herself is implicitly present: Anita Desai aggress with her observation: "If a character of mine is capable of possessing both a sane and an insane half. Then so am I." p.25.

Hence in her novels we find the mixture of her personal, experiences with people whom she met, her surroundings and the imagination.

Anita Desai writes under compulsion not for pleasure. She feels herself uncomplete without writing. She thinks that writing makes life worthwhile otherwise the existence would be meaningless. Anita Desai says about her artistic endeavours which aptly clarify the various facets



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of her narrative at and establish her in a respectable position in the tradition of the Indian English novel.

She states: "What I wish to say is that writing is not an act of deliberation, reason and choice. It is a matter of instinct, silence and waiting." As Nissim Ezekiel support this prose statement in poetry.

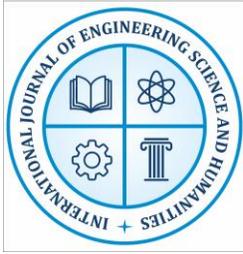
"The best poets waits for worlds.

The hund is not an exercise of will.

In Anita Desai's fiction the sitting is the upper class Indian family life. Falsed, and take Her women protagonists are sensitive, intelligent, gifted women married to gentle, dutiful but insensitive men. Due to that they slowly sinking in the Host co bog of a dull matrimonial relationship. There is a compelling urge for a way of living which would respond to the innermost yearings of women for freedom, self-introspection and self-dignity. Anita Desai's women protagonists are much individualistic and temperamental to compromise with the harsh mechanical existence; As Maya in 'Cry the Peacock', Monisha in 'Voices in the city', Nanda Kaul in 'Fire on the mountain', Bim in 'Clear Light of the Day', and Sita in 'Where shall we go this summer?' first two heroines commit suicide and last two reluctantly have to compromise. In the search of identity or to know the real meaning of life,all the protagonists nearly become insane or neurotic as Maya all the time thinking about prophecy "The time has come. It is Gautam or I have to go.' Sita has a hallucination to preserve the child in womb, Thus all the characters who are delineated by Anita Desai in her fiction are not normal as she herself admits- "I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against the general current."

All the heroines in her fiction are constantly, persistently grappling with their situation but at last they become unable to take the life in totality and at one stage they turn into objects of pity, because their obsession, frustration and utter disappointment, take the shape of failure,resignation or suicide. Tired by the drab and dry vegetable existence of matrimonial life all the women rebel against it. There is a great desire in them to be heard. praised, and taken seriously as an individual being not treated as pet animal or child like. As Maya says in "Cry, the Peacock" "...he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not noticed the translucent skin beneath, the blue fleshing veins that ran under.... Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed." p.29

All these lines reveals her mental and emotional agony to be noticed, praised and understood by her husband and when they find themselves neglected being at every step, the quest of existence or self-identity sprout in them. This quest lead them towards alienation, struggle, self-introspection and last in utter disappointment or suicide. But in her interview to Jasbir Jain Desai



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says- "I think basically the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging. That is while exile has never been my because an exile from the society can not solve any of the theme." p.30 problems, although her heroines suffer from this kind of exile or alienated self, unable to find the proper solution of her problems that is identity crisis. In her novels Anita Desai beautifully delineated the theme of alienation, quest for existence, treatment of love marriage and sex, viz. matrimonial problems, Parent-child relations, attitude of the society towards female, besides all these she spotlights many other problems as incapability of facing the hard realities of life, revolt against fate and patriarchal society, conflict between conscious and unconscious mind, feeling of helplessness, worthlessness and emptiness of life, problem of adjustment. Lack of understanding and love, conflict between reality and illusions in life revolt against cruel world, boredom and monotony of house, difference of sex, parents-fixation, hopelessness and aimlessness which ultimately leads her characters to go in negative direction as suicide or other frustration etc.

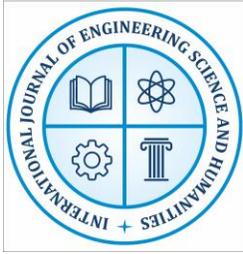
Anita Desai did not deal only with female characters as Shashi Deshpande but with male protagonists but specially more emphasis is on female characters who strive hard to know the real meaning of life. She treats in her fiction emotional and intellectual oppressed women. Desai says about her female protagonists "women both as characters and as people must be allowed their imperfections. If I create a female character, I would like her to be able to show her having the emotions all human beings have- hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear as well as love, comparison, tolerance and joy without having her pronounced as a monster, a slur or a bad example."

So, it seems that Anita Desai, through her novels, seems to say that women have not gone for in achieving anything significant least of all their recognition as human beings. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect rather as a pet animal, market commodity or social show-piece.

Thus Anita Desai preoccupation with feminine sensibility is unique in the annals of the Indo-Anglian novels. A critic says- "Her feminism is not of the demanding, obtrusive, clamoring kind but constitutes sensitive portrayals of intelligent, gifted women married to gentle, dutiful but insensitive, materialistic men and who are slowly sinking in the bog of a dull matrimonial relationship.' Her woman protagonist, "strive towards arriving at a more authentic way of life than the one which is scholarship which available to them."

Conclusion

Anita Desai's contribution to 20th-century Indian feminist literature is both significant and enduring, marked by her deep psychological insight and nuanced portrayal of women's experiences. Rather than relying on overt activism, she foregrounds the emotional and mental struggles of her female characters, revealing the subtle yet pervasive impact of patriarchy. Her works illuminate issues such as isolation, identity crisis, and the quest for self-realization within



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restrictive social frameworks. Through her refined narrative technique and introspective style, Desai expands the scope of feminist discourse by emphasizing inner consciousness as a site of resistance and understanding. Her literary legacy lies in presenting women not merely as social beings but as complex individuals navigating personal and cultural tensions. Consequently, Anita Desai remains a pivotal figure whose writings continue to inspire feminist thought and literary scholarship in contemporary contexts.

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