



## **ANITA DESAI THE CONNOISSEUR**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Anita Desai is a distinguished artist of high order and her concern for human lot has imparted profound appeal to her novels. Of all the contemporary Indian English novelists, she is indisputably the most popular and powerful novelist. She has made commendable contribution to the Indian-English fiction. She is a novelist of urban milieu and is a fine mixture of Indian, European and American sensibilities. She writes instinctively as if writing is an urge for her. Writing is a process of her self-discovery to go deep into the complexities of existence. She is essentially a psychological novelist. She claims that her novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics, or character. She does not reflect on social issues in her works, like Mulk Raj Anand. She sees social realities from a psychological point of view and does not look at them as a social reformer or a moralist. Her focus of attention is on the inner climate, the climate of sensibility. Her main concern is to depict the psychic state of her protagonists at a crucial juncture of their lives. She creates a limited world by observing minutely what is going on around her.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In her excellent study of Indo-Anglian fiction. *The Twice Born Fiction* (1971-74), Meenakshi Mukherjee calls Anita Desai

*“a rare example of an Indo-Anglian writer who achieves that difficult task of bending the English language to her purpose without either a self-conscious attempt of sounding Indian or seeking the anonymous elegance of public school English.”<sup>7</sup>*

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Her growing popularity is seen in the increasing number of researchers taking up critical studies of her works for their doctoral degrees, in the publication of research books and articles on various aspects of her works. In the words of G. Rai, “She is almost alone among the Indo-Anglian writers who has used stream of consciousness technique in her novels.”<sup>8</sup> She makes a clear cut distinction between the writing of the inner and outer world and proceeds to delineate character and depict the situation from the personal angle. She is an uncrowned queen of the inner emotional world. Endowed with boundless imaginative resourcefulness and creative vitality, she writes remarkably well about only those aspects of life she has minutely observed and deeply experienced. As a novelist her distinguishing qualities are many. The chief among them is the subordination of the background to the characters and the deft handling of language, imagery and syntax. In order to convey an intimate expression of the inner world of her characters, she makes each of her work a haunting exploration of the psychic self.

The writers Emile Bronte, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, Proust, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Kawabata, Rimbaud and Hopkins have made significant impact on Anita Desai’s thinking and writing. Indeed, she has written her novels under the impact of these celebrated modern writers. Admitting it, she says,

*“In my twenties when I first began to work seriously and consciously on my novels, it was D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Proust that influenced me more strongly. Later, the novels of Japanese writer, Kawabata and more and more modern poetry - particularly that of Rimbaud, Hopkins and Lawrence.”<sup>9</sup>*

She was only nine years old when she read *Wuthering Heights*. Although she could not have understood half of it, it struck her

*“with a gale force, it set my hair on end, I vibrated to it - I have never forgotten that experiences and reality has never again seemed to me half as intense significant or overwhelming as the world of books,...”<sup>10</sup>*

Ever since, literature has seemed to her more interesting more significant and more overwhelming than the real world. With her early childhood nurtured in a Brontean world, she has imbibed depth and hue of the fiction writers of the West. If the Western writers presented her with general criteriology for her choicest field, the poets of the East furnished her with the charms of rhythms and style; whatever she heartily welcomes was deeply and successfully entranced within, to enrich her creative perspective.



Anita Desai is popularly known for sensitivity in structuring the pattern of her novels, integrity of her artistic vision, imaginative mind, keen observation, sharp awareness and competent craftsmanship. She has become a much sought-after writer by publishers and readers alike. She has written to date twelve novels:

1. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963); 2. *Voices in the City* (1965);
3. *Bye, Bye, Blackbird* (1971); 4. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975);
5. *Fire on the Mountain* (1977); 6. *Clear Light of Day* (1980); 7. *Village by the Sea* (1982-88. *In Custody* (1984); 9. *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988); 10. *Journey to Ithaca* (1995). 11. *Fasting and Feasting* (1999), 12. *The Zig Zag Way* (2004).

Her novels have an existential psychological bearing.

Anita Desai's novels are not a documentary on rich contemporary society. She chooses those parts of society which she knows deeply and presents them with her vision. She herself accepts that she is not at all interested in writing about typical families. Her novels are written from instinct rather than observation. She seems to be well acquainted with the inner life of the women of upper middle class and that is why she effectively depicts the complexities and compulsions of the intelligent and sensitive women of this class. She selects from her social experiences the relevant ones and leaves the irrelevant experiences. She looks into the future with her keen insight and instinct. She probes deeply into the social forces which decide the development of a woman in a family of the male dominated society of India. She writes in a private world of her own. Her creative process is not for a public show. She herself feels that to scrutinise the creative process in the light of reason is to commit an act of violence. She accepts that the creative writer prefers the flashes of individual vision and depends on a kind of instinct that tells him what to follow and what to avoid.

Desai's primary concern as a novelist is with the lonely individual. Her fictional world postulates an engaging tussle between the alienated individual and chaotic milieu. She deftly explores the emotional ecology of her protagonists who are shown "*facing single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence.*"<sup>11</sup> She is mainly concerned with the projection of the "psycho-philosophic, psycho-emotional and socio-psychic states of the female protagonists living in an alien, closed, and cloistered world of existential problems and passions, loves and hates."<sup>12</sup> She writes instinctively, carried away by her compulsions, allowing the novel "*to sprout and grow freely like a tree under the blue sky, and then trimming its ugly branches and uprooting the weeds growing around it.*"<sup>13</sup> The object that triggers her imagination could be very significant. As she says to Atma Ram in an interview; "*a leaf dripping under rain drop, a face seen on the bus or a scrap of new read in the papers....*"<sup>14</sup> are really significant to her as she is very sensitive.



Unlike R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya who confined themselves mostly to the portrayal of outward reality, Anita Desai goes to explore the inner reality. She always depends on her private vision than the subjective rendering of external reality. One of the most important aspects of her work is her ability to fuse form and content. Form becomes a mode of discovering content. Her preoccupation is with the individual and his inner world of sensibility. Her fictional world is half-revealed and half-concealed, partly real and partly fictitious. She is like the imaginative contemporary of the European, American and Commonwealth development of a woman in a family of the male dominated society of India. She writes in a private world of her own. Her creative process is not for a public show. She herself feels that to scrutinise the creative process in the light of reason is to commit an act of violence. She accepts that the creative writer prefers the flashes of individual vision and depends on a kind of instinct that tells him what to follow and what to avoid.

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Anita Desai spotlights on 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 luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelop, surrounding us from the beginning of conscience to the end.”<sup>15</sup> The purpose of her writing is to discover for herself and then to describe and convey the truth. She clearly differentiates between truth and reality and finds no difference between them. She thinks that the world is like an ice-berg, the one-tenth visible above the surface of the water is what one calls reality, while nine-tenth submerged make up the truth and that is what one is trying to explore. For her “it is depth, which is interesting, delving deeper and deeper in a character, a situation or a scene rather than going round about it.”<sup>16</sup> This technique is used by her in capturing a ‘psychosocial realism’ and an ‘intensified expressionism’. She is very much interested in exploring the psychic depths especially of her female protagonists. K.R. Srinivasa Ayengar rightly says, “Since her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style, supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters.”<sup>17</sup> “In the 1990s it was Elaine Showalter, who claimed that feminist criticism has finished with her ‘gyno-criticism’ and needed to focus on gender and sexual difference in texts by men as much as by women. ‘Speaking of Gender’ (1989) focused on significations of the feminine in the works of Irigaray, Jardine and others. Thus from 1970s onward the growing interest in feminist criticism has taken speedy strides. Like political feminism which began with the Women’s Liberation Movement in ’70s, critical feminism today is shaped by a much richer understanding of difference.... With such conceptions feminism comes a long way from power politics to an understanding of cultural diversification.<sup>18</sup>

Women’s writing which springs from the new concept of Indian womanhood is voluminous and it depicts in their phases of new liberation movement, the changing concept of the woman’s subjectivity. The analysis of Desai’s novels would unfold not a totalitarian ideology of their unified goal or a metaphysical absolute; rather it will reveal a prospect of achieving a feminine consensus where each novel voices her story.

With the rise of feminism in India in the seventies, the feminist literary critics came to believe that women had to create a literature of their own, in which the feminine sensibility could consider and confront the peculiarly feminine issues and experiences. It was essential to do so, because a large part of the feminine experience is out of the reach of the male psyche and, therefore, an authentic and sensitive portrayal of the conflicts and traumas, in all their nuances, ambiguities and contradictions, could be achieved only by women writers. We have, through women writers’ writings, the pictures of women in flesh and blood, with a distinct mind of their own. She is no more a wooden creature, subject to suppression and male domination only. The transformative power of Anita Desai’s novels lies in her taking up

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the task of revealing the process of self-awareness at work in feminine psyches. Her novels are an engrossing study in the progression of women from feminine to female as stipulated by Elaine Showalter. Her women characters are sensitively portrayed and therefore, are best appreciated in their psychological depths. Desai's feminism is not the same as hating man or abandoning families and relationships or indulging in lesbianism, etc. As a feminist she wants women to be accepted as responsible human beings.

Feminism in literature is essentially concerned with the representation of women in society. Feminism has always meant independence of mind, spirit and body. The demand of feminists is women's control over their own lives. With the advent of feminism, each and every female oriented subject has become an issue of contemporary literary debate. Feminists consider that male authored texts have obtained double standards in their treatment of male and female characters. Today female writer feels that she is helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitively emerging. Thus, to become a feminist means to be prepared for a profound personal transformation.

The novels of Anita Desai are basically female oriented. She probes into their problems, be it of a daughter, sister, mother, grandmother or a wife. Her female figure appears as a victim in a patriarchal, patrilineal and father dominated Indian family. Anita Desai depicts the Indian woman as a fighter, a victim, a heroine and in later novels ultimately a winner because of her indomitable spirit and attitude of compromise. She has portrayed both kinds of women — those who are symbols of growth and change, those who are powerful means of withdrawal, regression, decay, death and destruction. She designs the exploration of the disturbed psyche of the Indian woman lying emphasis on the factors of loneliness and alienation. However, Desai's women do not give up the strife so easily. Desai focuses on the gender roles of women seen through the lense of female activities experiences, goals, values, institutions, relationships and modes of communication. Desai's contribution in the field of feminism does not merely involve revalidating the French theories or the western model. She presents in her writing, the pictures of women in flesh and blood, with a distinct mind of their own. Her characters are no more wooden creatures, subject to suppression and male domination only. The transformative power of Anita Desai's novels lies in her taking up the task of revealing the process of self-awareness at work in feminine psyche.

Anita Desai, along with Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee and others, writes primarily women's novels — novels that are addressed to and deal with women. Desai is satisfied to dive deep into the inner working of the protagonists and brings out the hidden depths of human psyche. Her fictional world is just like an iceberg mostly hidden and partly visible, it is overcast by mist and fog, half revealed and half-concealed. Her inner voyage of the characters in her novels is greatly influenced by *Virginia Woolf*. She has been hailed as a

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pioneer of Indian feminism. She brilliantly exposes the grinding suppression of women in India:

*“Even if in reality she is nothing but a common drudge, first in her father’s house and then her husband’s — a beast of burden bearing an endless string of children, putting up with any brutality or disloyalty or failing of her husband — she has no alternative : She must live as Sita did, as Draupadi did, she is Durga incarnate. The myth keeps her bemused, bound hand and foot. To rebel against it — either in speech or action would mean that she is questioning the myth, attacking the legend, and that cannot be permitted; it is the cornerstone on which the Indian family and therefore Indian society are built.”<sup>19</sup>*

In her world, it is always the ‘Sitas’ who interrogate their patriarchies. The portrayals of men are indistinct and their psychological complexities are not taken into account. Men in her novels mostly exist only as projections of women’s point of institutions, relationships and modes of communication. Desai’s contribution in the field of feminism does not merely involve revalidating the French theories or the western model. She presents in her writing, the pictures of women in flesh and blood, with a distinct mind of their own. Her characters are no more wooden creatures, subject to suppression and male domination only. The transformative power of Anita Desai’s novels lies in her taking up the task of revealing the process of self-awareness at work in feminine psyche.

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*“I find it impossible to whip up any interest in a mass of woman marching forward under the banner of feminism.”<sup>20</sup>*

The preoccupation of Desai as a feminist writer or rather a writer of feminist psyche has been to analyse the extent of the psychic damage in women due to their respective patriarchal pressures.

Most of Desai’s women characters registered protest against the circumstances which oppressed them. Yet where Maya, Monisha, Nanda, Anamika and Uma failed to tide over the crisis, Bim, Sita and Sophie succeeded in doing so. Desai’s entire fiction traces the changing image of women in the face of existential dilemmas. These female protagonists assert their right to exist not as shadows of their male counterparts but as independent human beings with a will of their own. In fact this is the real aim of any feminist. Her characters realised that to live life one had to face new challenges, that hatred was of no avail, that all transcending love could overcome all obstacles, that life is indeed one single whole which is a delicate inter-connected web. It shows although Desai is not a surrealist yet her understanding of the female psyche is highly distinctive and remarkable. She views the female in relation to different kinds of organization—familial, social, national and international.

One of the primary concerns of feminism is to declare that a woman is a being. She is not an appendage a subordinate of man. Rather she is an autonomous being, capable of trial and error, finding her own way to salvation. We come across such women figures in the novels by Anita Desai, who are consciously trying to come to terms with themselves as individuals. Their voice is now gradually becoming audible and there is definitely a protest in their own voice. There is a clear tone of resentment and a pressing demand for freedom from traditional fetters which have been imposed on them and their gender. Feminism is a concept emerging as a protest against male domination and the marginalisation of women. The new woman has raised her voice against the atrocity and injustice done to her. The modern woman protests

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and dares to pronounce her convictions. And it is their voice of protest, their pronouncement in an overtone that has credited the difference and force us to consider and call Anita Desai as a focused feminist. Desai has presented three kinds of females. In the first group are such females who are hypersensitive and after self introspection they plunge further into dark dismal depths of neurosis, like Maya. The second group portrays women characters who silently suffer the strain of life and become idealists or commit suicide like Monisha. While the third group discloses women who discern new and important discoveries about themselves resulting in a sobering effect on them and they find a sense of fulfilment in their relation to the world. Even in a male dominated, tradition oriented society such women characters try to establish their own value system and if fail, then their inner potentiality enables them to resist unjust social pressure and they protest.

For Desaij, feminism in Indian context lies in the spread of education, economic self sufficiency, preservation of human rights and in the awareness of the desire for liberation from mythical and social values which constrain women as well as men socially, psychically and physically.

Capable of trial and error, finding her own way to salvation. We come across such women figures in the novels by Anita Desai, who are consciously trying to come to terms with themselves as individuals. Their voice is now gradually becoming audible and there is definitely a protest in their own voice. There is a clear tone of resentment and a pressing demand for freedom from traditional fetters which have been imposed on them and their gender. Feminism is a concept emerging as a protest against male domination and the marginalisation of women. The new woman has raised her voice against the atrocity and injustice done to her. The modern woman protests and dares to pronounce her convictions. And it is their voice of protest, their pronouncement in an overtone that has credited the difference and force us to consider and call Anita Desai as a focused feminist. Desai has presented three kinds of females. In the first group are such females who are hypersensitive and after self introspection they plunge further into dark dismal depths of neurosis, like Maya. The second group portrays women characters who silently suffer the strain of life and become idealists or commit suicide like Monisha. While the third group discloses women who discern new and important discoveries about themselves resulting in a sobering effect on them and they find a sense of fulfilment in their relation to the world. Even in a male dominated, tradition oriented society such women characters try to establish their own value system and if fail, then their inner potentiality enables them to resist unjust social pressure and they protest.

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#### **CONCLUSION :**

**The aim of the study is to examine:**

1. The feministic concerns in the novels of Anita Desai
2. The feministic emancipation that the women of the Desai long for –
3. The resultant impact on marriage as an institution.
4. The ways and means to protect the mal adjusted marriages.

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