



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 8.4  
IJAR 2022; 8(1): 359-362  
[www.allresearchjournal.com](http://www.allresearchjournal.com)  
Received: 08-11-2021  
Accepted: 18-12-2021

**Dr. Piu Sarkar**  
Former Faculty of English,  
DDE, Burdwan University &  
Independent Researcher, West  
Bengal, India

## Torn between two worlds: Exploring the feminine psyche in Anita Desai's fictional works

**Dr. Piu Sarkar**

### Abstract

Anita Desai is a novelist of feminine psychology par excellence and she holds a strong position among Indian English fiction writers of 20<sup>th</sup> century. With a bunch of exquisite works like *Cry the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Clear Light of Day*, *Journey to Ithaca*, *Fasting, Feasting*, *In Custody* etc. Anita Desai leads a change by focusing on the internal workings of human mind, specially of the female protagonists. Women in our society have been silently oppressed, tormented and victimized from ages under the patriarchal rules and social structure. Desai's creative mind marvellously throws light on this aspect of feminine psychology and how much women suffer under stifling situations, how they are torn apart between their aspirations and patriarchal expectations. With a deep insight into human mind and its workings, Desai artistically explores the internal zone of female psyche and consciousness instead of external circumstances. This paper aims to project women and their psychological journey in some select novels of Anita Desai.

**Keywords:** Psychological sojourn, disappointment, dilemma, female psyche, isolation, hypersensitive, patriarchy, agony

### Introduction

Anita Desai is one of the most powerful and distinguished Indian English novelists with an extraordinary sharpness and penetration of vision. Her writings have drawn world-wide critical attention. Anita Desai has added a new dimension to the Indian English fiction: the exploration of human psyche. She is endowed with searching psychological insight and often peeps into the inner recesses of the psyche, rather than merely presenting the outer spectacle of the world. In her novels, she skilfully explores the emotional ecology of her protagonists who, while combating the ubiquitous forces of absurd realities, feel terribly oppressed with the burden of living helplessly in contemporary chaotic conditions. Going deeper into the complexities of human existence, she endeavours to evaluate the various formidable factors that make existence uncomfortable and unendurable. The richness of her multi-splendored art and her never-dying themes call for a host of critical studies from different angles. Desai's novels are distinguished by her focus on the inner life of her characters and her concern with people previously marginalized in Indian fiction, primarily women, children and the elderly. She prefers the private to the public. For her, literature is neither a means of escaping reality, nor a vehicle for parading her political, social, religious and moral ideas, but an exploration and an inquiry. Her *Cry*, *The Peacock* is nothing but an externalization of the interior of Maya's Cocoon while *Voices in the City* is the reflection of the rattling reverberations of her sensitive characters under the tyrannizing force of the city of Calcutta. *Where Shall We Go This Summer* and *Fire on the Mountain* are lyrical outbursts of women seeking peace and quiet in life, while *Clear Light of Day* is the story of the slow and reluctant maturing consciousness of a woman wrapped up in the world of fantasies and visions. Being a subjective and psychological writer, she is often forced to peep into the inner recesses of the psyche rather than in the outer spectacle of the world and the creative spirit of imagination is her unfailing reserve and security. The spectacle of suffering among human beings and non-human beings draws her mind and heart. The very sight of human misery lacerates her heart as deeply as that of a sparrow or any small bird. "She is more preoccupied with the Sombre than with the frivolous side of life" (Tripathi 4). "In dealing with the interior landscape and the psychic odyssey of her characters, Desai has extended and enlarged the thematic horizon of the Indian English novels.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Piu Sarkar**  
Former Faculty of English,  
DDE, Burdwan University &  
Independent Researcher, West  
Bengal, India

Dealing with the thoughts, emotions and sensations at various levels of consciousness, Anita Desai found the technique used by D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Henry James, i.e. stream of consciousness technique and flashbacks in her novels” (Tandon 27). The most important aspect of Anita Desai’s art is the delineation of character. She depicts female characters living in separate, closed and sequestered world of existential problems and passions with remarkable ease and adoration. All her female characters – Maya, Monisha and Sita are obsessed with the idea of death. Anita Desai is not interested in portraying every day, average characters but in peculiar and eccentric characters. She writes:

I am interested in characters who have not retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair so turned against, or made to stand against, the general currents; it makes no demands, it costs no efforts. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out “the great No”, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them (Desai 4).

Mrs. Desai’s basic interest lies in exploring the disturbed zones of the female psyche. She portrays her characters as individuals facing single-handed the ferocious attacks of existence. The most significant aspect of her fiction in her manner of individualizing the character. She presents each individual as an unsolved mystery. Almost all her protagonists are oversensitive, solitary and lost in thought. Her heroines are seen withdrawing into a world of isolation and solitude. Even if they enjoy material prosperity, their emotional and intellectual aspirations remain unsatisfied. All heroines are suffering individuals. They suffer because they refuse to conform due to the fact that they all possess “abnormal consciousness.” Anita Desai is the first to explore the modern Indian sensibility. As her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility, 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. She excels in highlighting the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional woman, tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness and of desperation. The existential problem of the alienated self finally emerges to be the central theme of her novels.

### **Desai’s Protagonists and their Psychic Dilemma**

Her first novel *Cry, The Peacock* (1963) presents the story of Maya, a young sensitive woman obsessed by a childhood prophecy a disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is rendered in terms of immeasurable loneliness. The very beginning of the novel highlights the husband-wife alienation theme by unfolding the relationship of Maya and Gautama. Maya is self-centred, egocentric, exaggeratedly fanciful and impractical. She is idle, self-indulgent, dreamy and her sensitivity to feeling, emotions and love is more than normal. Maya is married to Gautama, an older man, an insensitive, pragmatic and rational lawyer who fails to understand her sensitive nature. She suffers from father-obsession and looks for the typical father image in her husband. Childless with an uncaring husband, she is lonely and loneliness is the bane and burden of her psyche. Maya’s tragedy is that there is no one to share her feelings. Temperamentally, they are opposed to each other. The ever-widening gap in communication between the husband and wife is felt throughout the novel. Regarding the psychological agonies of Maya, Dr. Sanjay Kumar’s

comment is apt: “Maya’s fear is aggravated as she fails to relate to Gautama her husband. Between the husband and wife; there exists a terrible communication gap as both of them seem to live in different worlds” (22). Unlike Gautama, Maya is “romantic-related with ideal...egoistical and self-indulgent, pursuing fancies and fanciful feelings.... a toy princess living in a world of elusive happiness” (4). Gautama chides Maya for her eccentricity and self-indulgence:

Life is a fairy tale to you still. What have you learnt of the realities? The realities of common human existence, no love and romance, but living and dying and working, all that constitutes life for the ordinary man. You won’t find it your picture books. And that was all you were ever shown... picture books...all you ever knew was happiness. What a crime! A crime because it was a delusion. And here you are, capable of seeing nothing but delusions, imagining them to be real. (5)

Actually, Maya has lived a very protective life since childhood under her father’s strict control. Quite naturally she fails to cope up with the harsh realities of life once she gets married to the practical minded Gautama. At times she acts like a person possessed while at other times, she appears to be abnormal and incommunicado. She has a complex personality, more precisely a split personality. Being exceedingly in love of life Maya gradually comes to realize that only she has the right to live. Gautama being redundant is to die. Prior to Gautama’s death, Maya obsessed with the idea of death and doom, gradually loses control over her sanity. Her thoughts, words and actions become incoherent. She becomes aware of the impending insanity: “Yes, I am going insane. I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm and I shall soon be mad, if I am not that already” (8).

Maya’s mental deterioration is the result of self-centredness or self-pity. In her frenzied state she blurts out: “...no I’ll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore...only death and waiting” (11). Emotionally high strung and mentally distraught, she evokes myriad delusive and hysteric impressions through her hyperactive imagination: “Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment—these were the four walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain” (12). In her youth, Maya feels elated to find “my world is like a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes” (13). Ironically her imaginary world is crushed under the bitter reality of life. Bereft of all hope from life, she can think of nothing but stoic silence and extinction: “What if tomorrow I were a mere stone, mute, immobile, extinct? For now I knew my destiny. It was annihilation. Annihilation, I repeated trembling” (14). Maya comes to realize the split in her psychic self and admits “... I am torn between two worlds—the receding one of grace, the approaching one of madness. My body breaks in battle” (15). Resultantly she murders the element of sanity and lapses in the abyss of insanity.

Desai’s second novel *Voices in the City* (1965), a winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, dwells on the theme of existentialism and quest for meaning of human existence. Desai has emphasized on the droning obscure bargains of her protagonist, Monisha’s mind. Monisha too struggles to find her own self. She wants to free herself from the boundaries of the traditional Hindu family. She feels lonely in Calcutta and lives in her own world. She is tired of her

routine life and finds life meaningless. In the book *Anita Desai: A Critical Perspective*, Dr. P. M. Joshi expresses her opinion that, Desai depicts a touching picture of the life of a depressed, married woman Monisha, the sister of Nirode in *Voices in the City*. There are four female characters in the novel but Anita Desai has portrayed feminine psyche chiefly through the character of Monisha, who closely resembles Maya of *Cry the Peacock* in many ways. Monisha is just like Maya in the sense that, she too is childless, sensitive and a victim of an ill-matched marriage. It seems the Maya-Gautama tragedy is re-enacted in the Monisha – Jiban marriage. Like Maya, Monisha also suffers from morbid feelings about death. She too lacks love from her husband and suffers from feelings of emptiness within as well as without, but unlike Maya, she has learned to suppress her emotions. Monisha changes after marriage from a sensitive, mild, quiet sensible girl into a barren, distant, apathetic, neurotic, diary writing woman, which she herself hates. She is happy neither with her husband nor with his family members. Her ill matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility and the stress of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband push her to a breaking point. Her life is what she narrates. “My duties of serving fresh chapattis to the uncles as they eat, of listening to my mother-in-law as she tells me the remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban’s wife” (146).

Monisha’s arrival in Calcutta reveals the pains of her unfulfilled motherhood. She sees her big house shrunken, drawn together like a boil about to burst, symbolic of hollowness. Her relationship with her husband is marked only by loneliness and lack of communication. She is always obsessed with a feeling that her life is entirely meaningless. She finds her life a virtual imprisonment:

Why am I so sad? What am I so afraid? I am different from them all. They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without touch of love or hate or warmth on me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret. This life enclosed in a locked container, merely as an observer. (237)

Monisha’s world of pain, plight and psychic life is closely related to the women who are like female birds in cages. She wants to be herself and not to compromise. Because of her intellectual nature she is not much interested in religion. Even though she reads ‘Bhagvad Geeta’ she writes in her diary: “If I had religious faith, I could easily renounce all this but I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to, so I must say, such a life cannot be lived- a life dedicated to nothing – that is just in protection from death” (202). She thinks more and more in her loneliness and being an educated lady, she yearns for independence of thought and action. Monisha knows that she has to choose between death and mean existence for freedom and she does not take time to decide her way. She feels that she cannot live cheerfully in Calcutta where she becomes diminutive gradually. Her suicide is the silent mutiny towards her meaningless life which she has been living patiently for a long time. As she asks herself, “Is this what life is then, my life? Only a count drum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain never to arrive at a solution. Only a count drum is that, then life?” (122)

In her novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) Anita Desai presents an intense identity crisis of the central character Sita, a sensitive woman in her early forties.

Unable to live in the strife torn present, she is in the throes of identifying herself with the past, represented by her childhood on Manori island twenty years ago. The past becomes a psychic residue in her “personal unconscious”, the backdrop of her life, and her obsessive preoccupation with it gives her the strength to leave her home, husband, two children and the urbanized life of Bombay for Manori island, where she thinks she would be able to live under a magic spell. In the context of psychological portrayal of female characters Meena Belliappa observes: “What is new in Anita Desai is the effort to delineate a sensibility to locale, as it operates within the consciousness of her characters” (27).

In this novel Anita Desai again chooses marital discord as the subject matter and highlights the inability to expose one’s soul and expresses freely one’s dread and agony, which effects in breaking off communication between husband and wife. Just like the incompatible marriage of Maya and Gautama, Sita and Raman too find themselves trapped in their marital bond. A hardcore realist, calculative, business-oriented person is Raman unlike Sita who is imaginative and romantic with a proclivity towards dramatic emotion. Usha Bande puts it: “Sita makes a deal with destiny in the event that she is powerless, great and humble, she will be adorable, Raman will cherish her. As self-destroying individual, she stances to be great, without pride and expectations that she will be dealt with well by destiny and by others” (109). Sita gets alienated due to materialistic approach of her husband Raman, she feels isolation, despair in her husband’s parent’s house, “their age-rotted flat” that it is marked by ‘subhuman placidity, calmness, and sluggishness” and feels that” their sub humanity might swamp her” (43). In reality she considers most of the people there as animals. “They are nothing-nothing but appetite and sex only food, sex and money matter, Animals” (47).

She feels herself to be an encaged bird in a house which offers her nothing but a crust of dull tedium, of hopeless disappointment. Her unhappiness in married life finds expression in emotion of contempt for the friends and colleagues of her husband. Her cruel childhood, stricken with deprivation doubt and despair, has had a negative impact upon her psychology. She feels enslaved within these doubts and struggles to free herself. A series of situations and incidents project the seething tension, the compulsion and withdrawal of Sita’s festered soul. She turns into a paranoid character, a cripple without crutches, like a flying creature that startles at the slightest sound. She develops a haunting fear that there is a contradiction around her. Her abhorrence against the patriarchy, her boredom is only camouflages to conceal her failing strength from the world. Gradually, all the problems and complexities of her heart magnify in dimension. Like other protagonists cum heroines of Anita Desai, Sita repels from everyone, but she remains like an encaged bird. She can never attain peace and solace whether she is in Bombay or in Manori. Sita senses that if reality cannot be controlled then fancy would be the only alternative. She therefore, decides to live under an imagination and finds the island to be as a gypsy, a protection. It had provided her the first beams of happiness after a grim past. Now, with the passage of time she can imagine only the radiant prospects of the island which spells to her. The search for identity leads to the great protection to Manori Island – an escape of a sensitive individual from a life which is “a shadow, absolutely flat, uncoloured” (147).

Full of anxiety about life's uncertainty and insubstantiality, Sita desperately tries to escape from the mainland where "life was a crust of dull tedium, of hopeless disappointment—but a thin crust, a filmy crust that at every second or third step, broke apart so that she tumbled in with the most awful sensation, into a crashed pile of debris" (58). Her ardent desire to take resort in the island Manori actually signifies a dreamy side of her hypersensitive imagination and subconscious self:

...ordinary life, the everyday world had grown so insufferable to her that she could think of the magic island again as of release. If the sea was so dark, so cruel, then it was better to swim back into the net. If reality was not to be borne, then illusion was the only alternative. She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn, by magic. (101)

Sick with the boredom of aloneness alone Sita is finally disillusioned with the magic of Manori:

Manori was not a romantic island. Besides its palms, its deserted beach, its wild silence, there was the most squalid of villages, with its open drains, its magy pai dogs, drunkards...the continual wash of the rains could not quite cleanse it...she was confused—where was the magic of the island that she has promised herself, promised the children? Was this it? (102-03)

The dilemma of her existence ensues from her fragmented psyche which renders her utterly dazed and fazed, like a person marooned on an island, unable to decide the real and the unreal:

But was she sure it was not the other way around after all? Had not her married years, her dulled years, been the false life, the life of pretence and performance and only the escape back to the past, to the island, been the one sincere and truthful act of her life, the only one not false and staged? How could she tell, how decide? Which half of her life was real and which unreal? Which of her selves was true, which false? (153)

Sita's final plight becomes extremely grim and painful. Her traumatic experiences, delusions, agonies are the resultant of her own deformed psychic self. If she does not go mad like Maya or does not hang herself like Monisha, her life is not happy either. She realizes that real courage means standing up and trying to tackle the circumstances and coming to terms with them quietly, boldly and creatively. If she has to live on earth, she can do so merely either by adapting to her circumstances or by copying with others to whom she has to deal in the course of life. With Sita, this realization and subsequent reconciliation is more important than the previous conflict that had haunted her mind. In this kind of realization, one can discern an advancement in Desai's vision of a woman's struggle to find her existence.

### Conclusion

Anita Desai's novels are realistic depiction of the anguish and the conflict of the modern, educated, middle class women. Caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand and self-expression, individuality and independence on the other, her protagonists feel lost and confused and explore ways to fulfil themselves as human beings. In the presentation of inner mind reality, Anita Desai is perfect and her women characters are not ordinary and stereotyped but eccentric and peculiar. Women, in Anita Desai's fiction, epitomize the creator's journey for mental understanding, mindfulness and amicability. They are the point of

convergence of contact between the writer's cognizance and the world from which they are estranged. Her women need to confront clashes endeavour to split away, to state their independence and think whether their choice to do as such is the correct one, how to determine the identity emergency and rise triumphant from the injury. These are a portion of the inquiries Desai appears to investigate through her women characters. Her subjects absolutely touch the crude nerves of human experience. Desai has great contribution in the growth of psychological Indian fiction by portraying the psychic aspects of her female protagonists where they are not able to escape from despair, agony, detachment, adversity and isolation. In conclusion it may be said that the uniqueness of Desai's fiction lies in her treatment of feminine sensibility and her exploration of the emotional world of women with dexterity.

### References

1. Bande, Usha. "The Far Side of Despair". The Novels of Anita Desai. New Delhi: Prestige Books. 1988.
2. Belliappa, Meena. Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction. Calcutta: Writers Workshop. 1977.
3. Desai, Anita. Cry, The Peacock. Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980.
4. Where Shall We Go This Summer? Delhi: Orient Paperbacks. 1982.
5. Voices in the City. Delhi: Orient Paperbacks. 1985.
6. Kumar Sanjay. "The Reverse of Journey in Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock & Where Shall.
7. We Go This Summer? Critical Essays On Anita Desai's Fiction, Ed. J. Dodiya. New Delhi: Publishing House. 2000.
8. Tandon, Neeru. Anita Desai's In Custody: A Critical Appraisal. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors. 2011.
9. Tripathi JP. The Mind and Art of Anita Desai. Bareilly: PBD. 1986.