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## Women in Anita Desai's novels: A perspective

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### Abstract

Anita Desai is one of the most prominent Indian women novelists. She is known as the propagator of the Indian psychological novel. She was born in Mussoorie on 24th June 1937. She began her writing at the age of seven in English. She has written novels, stories, children books and articles. She is often considered as psychological novelist who deals with major themes of isolation, lack of communication, inner struggle, man woman relationship and marital discords. Her protagonists are female. They have raised a fiery voice or initiated an inner revolution against the traditional customs and gender discrimination with a view to equalizing human rights. Desai's women characters range from isolated Widows, spinsters to powerful and domineering female protagonists, Sita and Maya of Cry, the Peacock and Where Shall We Go This Summer? This paper proposes to draw attention to Desai's works as exemplary instances of postmodern womanism. Her distinct style of writing, original characters, use of language, realistic themes, and narrative technique has gained her recognition worldwide and earned numerous awards for her work.

**Keywords:** Isolation, gender, female, psychological

### Introduction

Indian writers have made their own place in the world literature. Today Indian writing in English has to be viewed in a global context. Indian English novel gained significance in 1930s with great writers like Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. They were followed by new generation novelists like Geeta Mehta, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande etc. All of them have earned considerable fame for their fictional contribution. Indian women novelists explored female subjectivity to establish an identity. Out of them Anita Desai is one of the most prominent contemporary Indian women novelists in English. She is one of the most popular also and has enriched Indian fictions at large.

Anita Desai introduced the genre of psychological novels in Indian English literature. The focus in her work is on the characters, women in particular and the inner world they inhabit. She employed psychological realism in her first novel 'Cry the Peacock' in 1963. The positive atmosphere in home and a very creative imagination helped her to be mature in her vision. Her father was a Bengali businessman and mother was of German origin. Her career as a writer started with short stories which were published in magazines. She has won the Sahitya Academy Award for her novel, Fire on the Mountain (1977) for the year 1978. She has written a large no. of books including children's story collections, novels and articles. Her novels are "concerned with the emotional world of women, revealing a rare, imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility." (Hariprassana, 8)

Desai's female characters are generally neurotic and highly sensitive. They are unwilling to succumb to the reality of their circumstances. They live in an alienated world of dream and fantasy and stand separated from their surroundings. Desai is a master craftsman as far as portraying feminine sensibility is concerned. In the words of K R S Iyengar "Her forte is the exploration of sensibility-the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is ill at ease in a sterile set up." (64)

Most of her female characters are unsatisfied, unhappy, and frustrated with the restrictions of the patriarchal society. They try to escape from their bondages and in the process get themselves mentally bruised. Her treatment of female characters, her feminist approach, analysis of gender bias and discrimination are seen in most of her novels. In this respect her novels are different from other Indian novelists: Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya or Ruth Jhabvala who are more concerned with politics or east west encounter. Desai's concern is with the psychic life of her characters. For this she has been considered as a novelist of mood and psyche.

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In her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* Maya, the protagonist, is obsessed with death and haunted by prediction of an astrologer that her marriage is going to end within four years with the death of either she or her husband. Finally succumbing to a bout of insanity she kills her husband and commits suicide. Desai takes up the theme of marital discord and disharmony. Maya's husband Gautam does not respond to "either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed" (196) Despite having a strong character Maya is frustrated and cannot resolve the situation. Her loneliness and her inability to share her feelings with her husband lead her to a tragic end.

In *Fire on the Mountain* Nanda Kaul, who is the wife of a Vice-Chancellor escapes from her house once her worldly duties are fulfilled and seeks refuge in the hills of Kasauli because of her unfaithful husband? His open affair with another woman hurts Nanda's dignity and renders her lifelong drudgery in his house meaningless. The novel is praised for its poetic symbolism and reflections of eco-feminism. All Nanda Kaul wanted was 'To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake.' (140) It features three female characters -Nanda, Raka and Ila Das, each lonely or damaged in some way. The novel presents the existential crisis in the lives of these female characters as they search for some meaning in their lives. Desai delves into the psyche of these characters and reveal their anguished selves. In the words of Ujwala Patil "Ila's rape enhances Nanda's guilt as Nanda could have helped Ila but did not. The shocking realisation that she had become a party to the oppression of woman by her indifference and selfishness overwhelm her and Nanda dies under the weight of her guilt." (63) The rebellious act of Raka at the end provides some salvation for the tragic lives of Nanda and Ila. Raka refuses to accept the established order based on lies and deceit. Her act of setting a fire symbolises her desire to destroy the old and pave the way for a new order based on truth.

Alienation, isolation, and a loss of identity are the main concerns of the novel In order to convey the theme, Desai uses places, characters, situation, dialogues and silence. She uses memories of past nostalgia as a narrative technique. In another novel of hers *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975) past memories play a significant part of the narrative. Sita, the protagonist of this novel, is obsessed with the memories of her childhood on Manori Island. Despite being a wife and a mother in the city of Bombay she cannot find compatibility or solace from her husband or children. Her regression in her past is rooted in her anguished psyche which brings her to the edge of insanity. Desai explores the psyche of Sita's disturbed mind and reveals her fears, her doubts and the identity crisis which is a result of her traumatic childhood. The novel also projects the theme of marital discord and conflict. Sita's husband Raman is insensitive to her needs. He doesn't understand his wife nor is he interested. They are like two opposite poles in a marriage which is on the verge of failure as Sita leaves her family in the quest for identity. The fact that she decides to return points out not only to the realization of the futility of her dreams but also to her conscious acceptance of her identity as a wife and a mother Commenting on Sita's decision to return Ranu Uniyal says "Sita's self-surrender after a brief 'No' is the only recourse left to her. Her 'No', although futile and presumptuous, offers her injured self a fleeting satisfaction, a temporary relief." (185)

Desai does not glorify her women characters but cites the truth as it is. Her sensitive portrayal of the inner feelings of her female characters is par excellence. Many of Anita Desai's novels explore tensions between family members

and the alienation of middle-class women. In her books, Desai has managed to deal with topics ranging from anti-Semitism to western quintessential ideologies of India and the death of Indian traditions and customs.

The garden is extremely important in Desai's world because her characters show an unusual sensitivity to it. For Maya it invokes desire, and for Bim it is a mediator between the inner and the outer world. Trees, creepers, tendrils, flowers, fruits, seasons, pets are more vividly perceived in Desai's novels than anywhere else in Indian English fiction. Nature has a special place in Desai's novels and sometimes takes a character of its own.

Another example of her strong female character can be seen in the Novel *Clear Light of Day*, where man woman relationship is seen in the context of love and hate relationship between siblings. Bim, the main protagonist of the novel, is like a mother to her two brothers Baba, who is mentally retarded, the younger one Raja and her sister Tara. She also looks after Mira Masi, who is a widow tortured by her relatives. Bim is different from Desai's other heroines. She is an educated, unmarried, working woman who is financially independent. She appears to have a stronger personality and can possibly be termed as a new woman. The novel presents the past in the context of the present. Desai analyses the inner most recesses of Bimala's mind. Her rage over Raja's letter comes from her sense of betrayal and hurt, but unlike some other heroines of Desai she does not succumb to her passions and forgives Raja.

Through the portrayal of these women Desai represents the Indian personality structure which is very complex and multi-layered. Referring to her characters Desai herself states that she does not write "the kind of social document that demands the creation of realistic and typical characters" (Dhawan 223) In the context of psychoanalytical study, we find Maya and Sita likely to be the representatives of repressed female community. In the sheer variety of her women characters and the sensitive portrayal of their existential dilemma, Desai leaves her contemporaries far behind and makes a mark of her own.

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