

Identity Crisis of Women Characters in Anita Desai's Major Novels

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Abstract : Anita Desai deals with the darkest and the deepest region of human mind which has been governed by unknown reasons. She is considered Virginia Woolf of India as well as the pioneer of contemporary women's fiction. Unlike her contemporaries, she has distinguished herself by stressing on "sights and sounds, on movements and patterns both physical and mental as they impinge on the consciousness of her protagonist." (Tandon, 15) She not only portrays women's consciousness but also familial relation, attitude, clash between tradition and modernity, shifting identity, immigration issues in the private public life. "Anita Desai ... can claim the unique distinction of giving a new dimension to Indian English fiction through her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* – which shifted the focus to the unexplored realm of the female psyche." (Maya, 145) So Anita Desai who was famous among contemporary fictionalists, has tried her best to depict the tragic end of human feelings which are chained in the difficult situation of human life. "She is more interested in the interior landscape of mind than in political and social realities." (Iyengar, 176). Finally, we come to the conclusion that the search for self-identity of women characters is the recurrent theme of Anita Desai's novels. It also aims to analyse how her female protagonists erupt from the norms of patriarchy and its effects on their life.

Keywords : Human mind; women's consciousness; shifting identity; interior landscape; self-identity; marginalisation; patriarchy.

In almost all the novels of Desai, she depicts Indian women as marginalised characters. They face socio-cultural constraints which are enforced by the contemporary patriarchal society. Most of the protagonists of her novels face multiple pressures from the patriarchal order. Some of them succeed in discovering their real identities such as in the novel *Where Shall We Go this Summer*, Sita goes to Manori so that she may remain far away from the monotony of Bombay.

She feels herself emotionally alienated. She is unable to adjust with her husband. Since she feels herself insecure, she is always fearful of even unusual events of life. According to her, this world is callous and destructive. Due to all these, she decides to go to Manori and not to give birth to her child. She considers Manori a tragic land. On the island, when she notices some romantic scenes like, a muslim couple, a foreign tourist and other more incidents, she gets influenced and prepares herself for compromise. But in spite of this sacrifice, she proves to

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be a failure as a mother because she is unable to understand the feelings of her children Menka and Karan. She thrusts her likes or dislikes on them. But when she is aware of the real place where she should re-establish herself, she returns for the metropolitan city, Bombay which she used to feel purposeless and boring earlier. Here, we see that there is no option left but to compromise with her. The novel is "...a real and pathetic picture of a lovely woman and aspires to establish victory over the chaos and sufferings of her rather unusual existence." (Dubey, 5)

In *Clear Light of Day* the protagonist, Bim (Bimla), an adult woman teaches History in Degree College. She is the eldest daughter of her family. Since her father is no more, she brings up her mentally retarded brother Baba and a senile Masi, Mira. Bim serves her brothers and sister so that she can educate and marry them. She is a self-disciplined woman; she likes to buy books. According to M.K. Naik, "...the only way to happiness is to acknowledge and accept all." (Naik, 79)

Her dedication and self-sacrifice for others intensify her feeling of loneliness. She feels herself wounded by her own self because none of them understands her rather everyone goes his/her own way and she gets nothing except harshness and bitterness which are the irony of her life in textual world. In spite of all these, Bim plays the role of the elder sister again in that very decaying family mansion in old Delhi. In this context, Madhusudan Prasad observes, "It is this dominant static image of the house that looms large in the mind of the reader, symbolically suggesting the suppressed anger and bitterness of Bim." (Prasad, 85) She is devoted to her brothers and sister so that she may educate and marry them. She lives the life of a saint. She is fond of reading books.

However, some of them like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* are destroyed in ongoing struggles in the textual world. Maya appears pure, poetic, instinctive and very much sensitive to the whole gamut of nature like flowers, fruits, shrubs, heaven, weather as well as pet and wild animals also. On the contrary, her husband Gautama is just opposite to her. Unlike Maya he is insensitive towards temporal beauty rather a complete rationalist. He is concerned only with absolutes. Even on the death of Maya's dog, Toto he does not mourn. So, Maya utters, "Oh Gautama, pets might not mean anything to you, and they mean the world to me." (*Cry, the Peacock*, 19)

The names of characters epitomise their incompatibility. The very name Maya symbolises "illusion" and Gautama Lord Buddha who is capable of rending the veil of Maya. In this way, while Maya makes merry in the world of the sense, Gautama discards it. There are three events which occur in the life of Maya. They are deprivation, alienation and elimination. First of all, she is taken away from the love and affection of her mother, brother and later her father. After that, she is alienated from her husband and lastly, she is alienated from her family, society and life. She neither establishes her identity nor identifies herself. The cry of peacock

is not an ordinary cry rather it is the cry of a woman, Maya who is dissatisfied with her husband and the world around. Actually physical dissatisfaction is the cause of her great pain and suffering. She sustains this injury, but it affects her mentally so much so that she becomes schizophrenic and a disordered being. Since she has become a slave of fate, she kills her husband on the prophecy of an astrologer. Here the conventional marriage system has been portrayed in the novel; the man-woman relationship appears to be totally broken.

Moreover, in *Voices in the City*, since Monisha fails to determine between life and death, she sets herself to fire to reach the case of intense feelings. She says, "I grow smaller every day." (138) The line shows her meagerness of life. When we compare Monisha with Maya who is the heroine of the novel, *Cry the Peacock* we see that both are childless and sufferer of voidness. In spite of all these similarities, we find so many differences too. Maya of *Cry the Peacock* is obsessed with father but Nirode with his mother. He is agitated with his life and attains nothing. If Maya pushes her husband Gautama from the roof so that she may keep her luxurious world safe, Monisha sets herself in fire to reach the case of intense feelings. Lastly, her soul and body secludes from the slavery of life.

Furthermore, when we compare Monisha with her sister Amla, we see that Monisha believes in imaginative world while Amla in realistic. She is well arranged than Monisha in her attitude to life. Like Nirode and Monisha, she is not morbid and destructive rather constructive. Her relationship with Dharma puts new life and vigour and she reorients herself.

After a detailed investigation of the novel, we find the dark domain of the mind of the protagonists—Nirode, Monisha and Amla. They are struggling to escape from the traditional family and society, the dominating social values, restrictions, conventions and the customs of the joint family system. Lastly, Monisha gets away into the world of death whereas Nirode leads a lifeless existence and Amla decides to fight till the end and adapts herself to the situation.

Again in the novel *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul is confident that all her cares for the household are non-meaningful in her lamented and fanciful old age. So, she herself tries to obtain a meaningful existence but she fail. "Nanda Kaul, a widowed great grandmother is a victim of her role as a dutiful wife to an unfaithful husband and as a mother of many children...". (Dubey, 5) The novel warns us through the character of Nanda Kaul that we should leave away the prejudiced thoughts. It shows the results of escapism in the form of copying mechanism. The central character Nanda Kaul feels herself alienated in spite of having all comforts of life like, a high posted husband, grand castle and van, children and grandchildren. The major themes of the novel are loneliness, isolation, uselessness of human life as well as fight for right.

The rest of the female characters fight to discover their real self and somehow they live their life. Amla in *Voices in the City* is not morbid and destructive rather constructive. Her relationship with Dharma puts new life and vigour and she reorients herself. As Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* loses her identity and feels alienated after her marriage with an Indian, she opposes the dilemma of uprootedness. She is in the fluctuation of reality and unreality. Her reaction is not against the material world rather racial and cultural discrimination. In *Custody*, Sarla's husband is unable to fulfil her desires and dreams on the material level; she suffers from a tight family budget.

Lastly, the study shows that most of her protagonists have been going through perpetual struggles to find their real self in this earthly world. They are made inferior by patriarchal culture. The very patriarchy undermines the female personality. Since they fail in improving their pitiable condition, they struggle to establish their own identity any way for survival. However, some of the inner contradictions in them do not allow coming out from the complexities and they fail in their struggle.

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