Psychoanalysis of Female Characters in the Fiction of Anita Desia

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Abstract:
Anita Desai is one of the considerable voices in the modern Indian English Fiction. She announced a new epoch of Psychological realism in this genre with her debut novel Cry the Peacock in 1963. Anita Desai’s novels work out the mystery of the inner life of her characters. She repudiates all social concerns and affirms more than once that she is “interested in individuals and not in social issues.” She has tried her best to understand closely the predicament of women in her novels on psychological ground. But as a woman writer she does not profess to be feminist, nevertheless, most of her novels throw a light on the voice of the fears and concerns, the hopes and aspirations of women protagonists. That is why; she ranks with other well-known female writers such as: Irish Murdoch, Doris Lessing, Margaret Lawrence, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Rama Mehta, Namita Gokhale, Arudhanti Ray, Bharati Mukharjee etc. She undoubtedly holds a prominent place among the contemporary writers and she is very bold and experimental novelist with a new looks in Indo-Anglion fictions who have achieved distinction as a woman novelist. The present research paper highlights Anita Desai’s psycho-analysis vision about female characters.

Keywords: Indo-Anglian, Female Protagonist, Psycho-Analysis, Aspirations, Predicament
Introduction: The fact is that Anita Desai has analysed her women characters on psychological ground and there is a sense of reality in her novels. She has laid emphasis not only on women characters; but on men characters also. She has used psycho-analytical method to explore the nature of events in portrayal of women characters. Therefore, she has made a crucial contribution to Indo-Anglion fiction and produced a galaxy of women characters touching various facts of their life. Most of the women characters in her fiction undergo a strange psychic experience and suffer from frustrations. They also undergo due to their hypersensitive nature and their insensitive husbands. Some restrictions of society enforce them to suffer intensely and it leads to incompatibility between the husband and the wife. The present research paper portrays these women characters who undergo psychological trauma in a male dominated society focusing on Anita Desai’s six novels, ‘Cry, the Peacock’, ‘Voices in the City’, ‘Where Shall We Go This Summer’, ‘Fire on Mountain’, ‘Clear Light of Day’ & ‘Fire on the Mountain’. Actually, Anita Desai started a new era of psychological novels and gave a new dimension to the world of novel writing in English. Moreover, Anita Desai has tried her best to project the languishment and predicament of women in a male dominated, conservative and taboo-ridden society.

Anita Desai in her novel, ‘Cry, the Peacock’, projects Maya’s character whose father’s excessive care and concern makes her behavior abnormal and her sorrow begins with her marriage to Gautama who is very insensitive to the desires of his young wife, Maya. Consequently Maya turns to lonely, isolated, alienated, neglected and frustrated life. However, Maya expects more attention from her husband; but he is very busy in his profession and he is unable to spare time for his wife, Maya. This is the reason that Maya has to suffer from loneliness and she remains childless after four years of her marriage. She is lovelier with her dog, Toto. Anita Desai remarks: “Childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets, they say. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child, no less worthy of reverences and agonized remembrance.”

When Toto dies, Maya goes into a deep depression and neurotic problem which in long run worsens her mental health condition. Even though her husband does not care her feeling and Maya becomes more reactive. Now her husband only utters as:; “You need a cup of tea, he said. Yes, I cried, Yes it is his hardness – no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and talking, I reveal myself. It is that-
There are no harmonious relations between Maya and her husband. Therefore, Maya has to suffer from hypersensitive fantasy and she lives an abnormal life. Her dog’s death is the first sign for her abnormality which evokes a series of consequent reactions. Moreover, her husband’s indifference behavior toward her makes her life unhappy and disharmony comes in their life. She becomes more psychiatric when her father tells her about the prophecy of the Albino, an astrologer who portends that either of the partners would die in the fourth year of the marriage. It becomes one of the causes for her abnormal behavior.

Maya is neglected by her husband who gives a rise to her loneliness and frustration. Her psychic problem leads her unhappy, lonely, unfulfilled, alienated and disappointed from her husband, she wants her husband to love her; but her husband advises her to practice detachment which results in the psychological trauma in Maya’s life and she becomes more hypersensitive. Meera Bai K remarks: “Like lady Macbeth, she becomes a victim of hallucinations which speed up the process of disintegration of her consciousness.” Now after the death of her husband, her life becomes meaningless. Anita Desai states her plight as under: “Maya’s plight as an inextricable paradox of love and death. Maya must live in order to exist as peacocks do and like peacocks again, she must tear the mate and be torn by him”. Thus, Anita Desai’s novel ‘Cry, the Peacock’ depicts Maya’s psychic and pathetic situation which is the central figure of her novels.

Anita Desai’s works are different from those of other Indian women writers in English: Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, who mainly concern themselves with politics, East-West encounter and social theme. Desai is concerned with the psychic life of her characters. For her it is “depth which is interesting delving deeper and deeper in a character or a scene rather them going round about it”. She has tried to understand minutely the predicament of her female characters. She represents the welcome “creative release of the feminine sensibility. For this she has been considered as a “novelist of moods, of persistent states of mind and psyche”. Usha Bande observes: Anita Desai disowns all social concerns and asserts more than once that she is interested in individual and not in social issues. Social issues intrude only where they affect the character. Because the main concern of Anita Desai to scan her female characters’ mental state of mind.

As in her renowned novel “Where Shall We Go This Summer?” depicts the fact that Sita, a woman protagonist in the novel is a sensitive, over emotional, middle aged woman, saddled
with her four children and pregnant for the fifth time feels alienated from her family because of her high strung sensibility and explosive emotions. The story is essentially a study of the marital discord resulting from the conflict between two irreconcilable temperaments and two diametrically different view points represented by Sita and her husband Raman. Sita is a sensitive, emotional middle aged woman saddled with four children. She feels alienated from her husband and children and undergoes acute mental agonies silently in isolation solely because of her sharp existentialist sensibility and explosive emotionality. Though she is placed in comfortable circumstances. She feels utterly lonely at heart where ever she was, with her husband and his family or away from him. The very interrogative title of this novel Where shall We Co This Summer? is a pointer to the very angst and ennui of her anguished soul. Sita, is a highly introverted character and the very appeal of her character consists in her inwardness, introversion and the resultant psychic odyssey. Having escaped from duties in her life she comes away to the island, Manori whishing for miracles in the island. Moreover, she is fed up with her daily life. Nevertheless, she realized her life’s reality and accepts it calmly. In spite of this, she is unable to adjust to the society which leads her to alienation. She thinks that this world is full of destructions. That is why; she does not want to give birth to her fifth baby.

Sita’s husband is an old, a static entity and unimaginable person. But Sita is initiated on small events. A vast change in her behavior is inconsistent and she fights with her husband and ultimately goes to Manori Island. There she introduces herself with Jamila, tea shop owner’s wife. But very soon she understands the reality of Manori and decides to return home. She learns harsh realities of life and compromises with it. M.Q. Khan states: “Her reaction proves that it is very difficult for a woman, however modern she may be, to get rid of the situation she is once placed in. She accepts defeat crumples her passion and mingles with the prose of life for the betterment of human relationship”. Finally, Sita’s behavior is result from a total neglect and indifference. Nevertheless, she has to compromise with the harsh realities of life.

“Voices in the City’ deals with the psychological trauma of an educated woman protagonist, Monisha who is married in a conservative Hindu joint family beyond her standard. She is not satisfied with her companion. She wants privacy and necessary space in her life. Nevertheless, she is happy and keeps herself busy with a lot of work. Her husband Jiban wants her to be friendlier with her family members but he too fails to respond to her
needs. Consequently, she is frustrated and wants to live a private and solitude life. Suresh Singhal remarks: “She represents the tragic intensity of conjugal incompatibility suffered by a woman, in the Indian context, who becomes emotionally, psychologically and physically vulnerable to her husband, and at the same time, paradoxically, that the security of the wife's role justifies and maintains relations between man and woman on the basis of the family institution rather than on the basis of real human involvement with each other.”

Monisha’s sterility results in a psychological emotional shock that upsets her behavior. She knows it very well that all the family members were talking about her infertility and her inability to conceive. When she takes Jiban’s money, she is accused of theft. Now she feels hurt and her husband does not support her. She understands the futility of her being economically weaker. She is already gripped by loneliness and neglected by her husband. The change of theft breaks her heart and she loses all hopes in life. M.Q. Khan Remarks: “Monisha like Maya, is a victim of the situation. The diminished dingy situation of the physical world drains out every drop of life from her. Though she is uncommunicative, her suicide is a confession of failure; through her reaction she disregards the idea that women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out”.

The concern of psychological reality by Anita Desai is clearly reflected in one of her masterpieces "Fire on the Mountain". The novel mainly deals with the loneliness and isolation as well as the resultant anguish and agony in the deserted life of an old widow. In the novel 'Fire on Mountain', Anita Desai focuses on the main protagonist, Nanda Kaul, in her self-chosen home of escape in Carignano. With the arrival of her grand-daughter, and her friend Ila Das, she is again formented by the past memories of her life in her marital home. The oppression and suppression Anamika, Uma’s cousin is another victimized woman- a victim of the Indian marriage system- a tragedy of arranged marriage or perhaps social disease of dowry or destiny. Anamika was very sober, not only was very pretty but also an outstanding student, to be privileged to win a scholarship to Oxford. She was a obedient child to her parents and would neither contradict them nor cause them grief. She “was cool, poised, mannerly and graceful. Wherever Anamika, was there was moderation, good sense and calm.” Even in her choice of her husband she remained passive leaving it to her parents who searched for a suitor who had qualifications equal to hers, but were wrong in their
choice, for the suitor was “totally impervious to Anamika’s beauty and grace and distinction. He was too occupied with maintaining his superiority.” The Indian system of arranged marriage fails, for Anamika was regularly beaten by her mother-in-law which was approved by her husband resulting in her miscarriage. Her parents, carried away by their own pretentiousness, turn callous and are responsible for the marriage which ends in Anamika’s death. Having sustained the torture and harassment for nearly twenty years, she finds no meaning in her life and like Monisha of ‘Voices in the City”, she too commits suicide by setting herself ablaze. Of her feelings are extents in her marital life. The other female character Raka appears to be one who achieves the greatest degree of physical liberation sight at Carignano. She is also tormented by the past memories of relationship with her parents. Ila das also experiences the most disastrous outcome of her trespass into the public sphere.

The novel deals with Nanda Kaul's determined detachment and non-involvement which is brought about by the unhappy conjugal ties which is seen in Desai's earlier novels like 'Cry, the Peacock', 'Voices in the City', 'Where Shall We Go This Summer', 'Bye Bye Blackbird', etc. Her fierce desire to live alone is the result of her busy but, empty live as the wife of an ex Vice Chancellor of Punjab University. She played the role a dutiful wife and almost everyone envied her. But the inner reality of her life is revealed to us when we learned that her relationship with her husband was an unhappy one. She led her life as he wanted her to live out of a sense of duty. Her life as a Vice Chancellor's wife though crowded and full of social activity was meaningless and unsatisfying. Although her busy schedule lacked warmth and understanding, she carried on because of her obligations to her husband and children. Once she discharged her duties she does not want any disturbances. "Discharge me", she groaned, "I have discharged all my duties. Discharge". She has done away with everyone and everything and becomes a recluse. Emotional deprivation is at the root of Nanda Kaul's disillusionment with human bonds. Her husband did not love her as a wife and treated her as some decorative and useful instrument needed for the efficient running of his household. She enjoyed the comforts and social status of the wife of a dignitary but deep down she felt lonely and neglected. Her husband extra marital affair with Miss David had been a source of agony throughout her life. She now believes every attachment to be the preface of a new betrayal and all socialization as fake. Her bond with her husband did not involve her "self". It was full on the surface but empty at the core. The painful memory of the days when her husband went to visit Miss David's home haunts her even in the isolation at Carignano and on such
occasions she lost her "composition and harmony". Feelings of anguish and distrust of humanity also reveals itself as she learns the death of Ila Das, her friend who was brutally raped and murdered. The traumatic married life of Nanda Kaul is clearly sketched in the lines "nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen-he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss David. And her children were all alien to her nature". In her earlier novels, the incompatibility of temperaments or psychic complexes cause dissonance in the marital ties. But in "Fire on the mountain" an extra marital affairs disturb the conjugal relationship of Nanda Kaul and her husband. This deeply affects her outlook on life and makes her distrust all attachments and affairs.

Anita Desai’s novel, ‘Clear Light of the Day’ was the landmark in career. Through Tara's and Bim's consciousness Desai examines the same events from different points of view. Although the characters barely venture beyond their front gate, they live out the legacy of India’s bitter battle for independence. "The spunky children of a poor Indian village, the Old Delhi family torn apart by Partition, the ageing debauched poet, the dignified, tired matriarch, the plain and lumpish spinster - Desai’s characters are never cardboard cutouts, they aren't victims and they aren't heroes - they are just human. It depicts experiences of female protagonists, Bim and Tara. These two female characters have to suffer due to oppression in the society and there is a question whether the characters have made the same attempts like those female characters in ‘Fire on the Mountain’ to escape from oppression. The fact is that if Bim and Tara can achieve more self-determination in the patriarchal society, they can reach ‘The Clear Light of the Day’ at the end of the novel.

Another novel written by Anita Desai is ‘Fasting, Feasting’ which points out the state of oppression, suppression and self-determination of Uma, Aruna and Anamika. t is a general experience that where a boy’s birth is supposed to bring happiness, a girl’s birth a bane. The woman in India takes a subordinate position from her birth. The middle class Indian woman hardly has any choice but to live on the physical and emotional leftovers of her brothers. The parents would gladly spend a fortune in nurturing and ensuring coveted education for their sons, while the girl is expected to live with the limited resources. The typical discrimination against the female child is well explicated in “Fasting, Feasting” as the parents of Uma, aim all promoting education of their son Arun, a male child, whereas, the girls are “being raised for marriage”. Arun is allowed to go to USA for the best education
whereas, Uma’s going to the convent close to home is not permitted. On the birth of Arun, Uma’s education is terminated and she is entrusted with child care and housekeeping by her mother who says that until her marriage, “you can help and look after Arun. And learn to run the house.” This is the lot of Indian female child, for the supremacy of the male child is a predominant feature of Hindu families in India. Uma is a victim of the typical Hindu family system in India. As the eldest child and that too, a girl child she has had to carry the burden of her guilt for being a woman. She stands betrayed by her father, who didn’t support her on the question of schooling and also by her mother who, being a woman, could not support her daughter.

Anamika Uma’s cousin is another victimized woman- a victim of the Indian marriage system- a tragedy of arranged marriage or perhaps social disease of dowry or destiny. Anamika was very sober, not only was very pretty but also an outstanding student, to be privileged to win a scholarship to Oxford. She was a obedient child to her parents and would neither contradict them nor cause them grief. She “was cool, poised, mannerly and graceful. Wherever Anamika, was there was moderation, good sense and calm. Even in her choice of her husband she remained passive leaving it to her parents who searched for a suitor who had qualifications equal to hers, but were wrong in their choice, for the suitor was “totally impervious to Anamika’s beauty and grace and distinction. He was too occupied with maintaining his superiority.”The Indian system of arranged marriage fails, for Anamika was regularly beaten by her mother-in-law which was approved by her husband resulting in her miscarriage. Her parents, carried away by their own pretentiousness, turn callous and are responsible for the marriage which ends in Anamika’s death. Having sustained the torture and harassment for nearly twenty years, she finds no meaning in her life and like Monisha of ‘Voices in the City”, she too commits suicide by setting herself ablaze. However, female protagonists in this novel differ from other two novels, ‘Clear Light of the Day’ and ‘Fire on Mountain’ as described earlier in this research paper. However, these women protagonists have made every effort to achieve liberation; but ultimately Uma, the main protagonist seems to be satisfied with her present life.
Conclusion:

Thus, all the women protagonists in Anita Desai’s novels react differently due to their hypersensitivity nature. Maya in ‘Cry, the Peacock’ is not satisfied with her husband and she kills him as fear lurks in her mind due to prophecy. Monisha, the female protagonist in ‘Vocies in the City’ is unable to live in a joint family set up as she lacks the solitude that she craves for. Sita in ‘Where Shall We Go This Summer’ too reacts hysterically and wants escape to Manori Island, but she returns to her husband and makes a compromise with the harsh realities of life. Nanda Kaul, ‘Fire on the Mountain’ is also victim of oppression and suppression of feelings due to her marital life. Bim and Tara in ‘Clear Light of Day’ receive the same degree of oppression in the society. Likewise three protagonists in ‘Fasting, Feasting’ also suffer for liberations. In this way, Anita Desai has been successful to present a psycho-analysis of her female protagonists in her fiction as received in the above novels. A.N. Dwivedi argues: “Anita Desai is the first to have laid bare the inner recesses of the human psyche; she is the first to introduce the deep psychological probing of her characters.” To conclude, we can say that all the psychological novels of Anita Desai retain the fundamentals of Indian Society.
References: