CHAPTER III
Her Women Characters
And Their Neurotic Anxiety

The third chapter I have taken for my thesis is “Anita Desai’s women characters and their neurotic anxiety”. Now the question that comes up is “what is neurotic anxiety”. Sundry writers have bestowed their various views and definitions on this topic. According to M. Rajeshwar,

Neurosis almost always results from a compulsion to repress one’s feelings and desires because they are not in consonance with the accepted norms of society. Women are mercilessly denied opportunities for open expression of their true feelings in the tradition-bound Indian society.¹

Neurotic anxiety is the state of mind in which individual feels nervous and vexed and doesn’t perform calmly. The individual is compelled by the social circumstances to repress one’s instinctual and if the individual is vulnerable, weedy and emotional, one finds an alternative in the way of both suffering and protest. Many writers have shown this way of suffering and worry that deals with intensely emotional experiences. It is factual that neurosis makes the suffering and nervousness an unconscious activity.

In Indian society that is tradition-bound society, people need to put up with some pathetic circumstances and their own suffering. This originates neurosis in them and the reasons behind this suffering are different individually.
Due to this uneasiness, nervousness and suffering, some people become neurotic, and such neurotic characters have been portrayed by different writers with the reasons and effects of neurosis in their lives.

An individual depends on the environment around one. If someone is unable in adjusting in this environment, one becomes frustrated gradually and this experience of frustration originates a feeling of insecurity in him/her. Thus, one develops a kind of anxiety- neurotic anxiety.

Indian women have limited freedom and insular mode of life. Their tendency and attitude towards problems and sufferings of life is prelude for neurotic reaction. In fact, neurosis is seen when an individual has to repress one’s desires and emotions due to social traditions. Such kind of repression turns them neurotic and these neurotic women have been the protagonists of various women writers in India. In the words of Albert Mordell,

All characters in fiction who suffer are in a small degree related to neurotics.... Though author usually deals with mild cases of neurosis and the psychiatrists with severe ones, their provinces are often the same. ²

The writers who deal with neurotic characters, show the deep inner psyche of their characters through which they reveal their basic problems, their attitudes towards life, their suffering and reasons of their pathetic condition, and how they want to overcome them. Neurotic characters become aware of their pathetic psyche and behave with psychological truth. A neurotic character may behave in more than one way. Sometimes when he becomes aware of the hidden facts of his
life, he heals himself of the ailment and sometimes he seeks refuge in sublimation or succumbing to his illness.

Many Indian women novelists like Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Nayantara Sehgal, Bharti Mukherjee, Nargis Dalal, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai have depicted the psychological realities of Indian lives. These writers have taken various neurotic characters in their novels.

The depiction of neurotic characters, especially neurotic women characters is praiseworthy in the novels of Anita Desai. The neurotic anxiety of her women characters has been revealed expertly in her works. Anita Desai deals with the feminine psyche of her female protagonists who suffer from different mental diseases and this becomes a nuisance in the development of their personality. Her characters become hysterical and neurotic as a tragic flaw originates in them. Her women characters are emotional who pine to be loved. Sometimes their parents are dead or absent in their life and sometimes they are psycho-emotionally uninvolved in their life. Thus, the neurosis originates in them since their childhood.

Anita Desai’s characters are almost sick of life and listless playthings of their morbid psychic longings. Most of her female protagonists are abnormally sensitive and unusually solitary to the point of being neurotic.3

Anita Desai brings out the unhindered thought process and mental agonies of her female characters artistically. An interesting fact about her neurotic characters is that in some of her novels her female characters suffer a lot for they have no children but in her other novels her women who have children also
behave abnormally. In this way, both of her women characters who have children and who don’t have children are neurotic and abnormal.

In the novels of Anita Desai, we find that her female characters have to repress their desires. Their fear and ambivalence of desires create an anxiety in them, and they begin to behave neurotically. They suffer as they have to do things against their will and they are not consulted in any matter. Most of her characters seem to be abnormal, eccentric, neurotic or psychotic. They show a tendency towards abnormal behavior, violence and even death. They feel alone, unwanted and unloved.

Betty Friedan points out in “The Feminine Mystique” how repression of individuality leads to neurosis and expression leads to self-realization. ⁴

Anita Desai focuses on the inner climate or the psychic states of her protagonists in different circumstances. Her women characters are highly sensitive who live in a world of dreams and imagination. They are alienated from their surrounding for they fail to adjust with the reality of this world. Their views differ from that of others and they make effort to find the meaning of their existence.

Because of many varying factors, her women suffer from so much mental tension and agony that they become abnormal. They are not only sensitive to the violence of the world but affected by it so that they become unable to lead a normal life. The reasons for the neurosis in her different women characters are various but most of them are neurotic, and Mrs. Desai has revealed feminine
psyche of neurotic women expertly through her different women characters. The depiction of their psychic imbalance is praiseworthy.

The issue of female neuroticism, a popular subject in feminism, is handled by Anita Desai with sensitivity and moving lyricism.\textsuperscript{5}

As a psychological novelist, Anita Desai is interested in the psychic life of neurotic characters rather than ordinary characters. In other words, it can be said that her women characters who are normal in the beginning, become abnormal or neurotic due to many factors. In Anita Desai’s writing, we find that she depicts the psyche of female of different age groups. Mrs. Desai shows the human nature so deeply while she depicts the gradual change in the psyche of her women characters. She shows artistically how the psychic conditions of her characters take the form of a disease and the characters become neurotic. When Anita Desai’s women, who are sensitive enough, come in contact with this violent world, feel unable to adjust in its vicious circumstances and react neurotically to the existentialist problems of their life. She has described the emotional world of her female characters. In her works, we find that melancholia causes depression, and when her characters are unable to cope with this depression, they have nervous breakdown. She deals with the nuances of human psyche artistically. Anita Desai reveals the frustration in the lives of her women protagonists and how this frustration becomes the cause of mental imbalance that makes the characters neurotic.

One other factor that is responsible for the neurotic behavior of her women characters is their desire for marital harmony that is never fulfilled.
The normal woman is known by her subservience and compliance, and any deviation from this automatically renders her abnormal. This kind of abnormality and insanity in women is traced undoubtedly to the result of oppression in a male dominated society.  

Consideration of the neurotic anxiety of her women characters needs the study of different characters individually and comparatively as the factors in their life that cause the neurotic anxiety, are various. Not only the factors because of whom neurosis arises but also their neurotic attitude or tendency and the effects of this neurosis are different in her various women characters.

Firstly we come to Maya, the heroine of “Cry, the Peacock” who is a neurotic young woman and her insanity seems to be due to marital discard. She is not satisfied in her own house although looking at the surface she seems to be pleased and satisfied having a secure home, worthy husband and a nice future. Yes, it is true that she is frustrated in her life and there are many factors that cause this frustration. Her husband Gautama who is a successful lawyer, has not enough time to share Maya’s loneliness and despair. He is unable to understand her mental condition. She feels that she is never given any importance by her husband. The other thing in her life that causes neurosis is her sexual frustration. In simple words, she is not satisfied sexually.

Cry, the Peacock depicts existentialism in its deep-seated morbidity through the neurotic and hysterical self of Maya pining for companionship. Hers is an explosive life of incommunication. Her loneliness, her aching heart and the progressive disorientation of self make
her an existential character. The loneliness corroding her heart and lacerating her psyche is existential in nature. 7

In the novel we come to know about Maya who becomes a hypersensitive and neurotic woman. Not only one but many factors are responsible for her neurosis, and she causes a lot of harm to herself and to others also in her neurotic behavior.

One other reason for Maya’s neurosis is her belief in the prophecy of albino astrologer about the death of either hers or her husband in the fourth year of their marriage. As she knows that her husband Gautama and his family will take this prophecy as a superstition, she can’t share her fear with anyone although this prophecy of the albino astrologer is a fact or truth for her. In the beginning of her neurotic suffering or pain, she thinks that it is she herself who will have to die but after some time she realizes that Gautama doesn’t enjoy the worldly pleasures so it is Gautama who is fated to die. This makes her more secretive and she becomes so anxious that she seeks Gautama’s death as a solution of her neurotic anxiety.

Another element responsible for Maya’s neurotic attitude is her idleness. In simple words, many servants work in her house, and she seems to be free of all the responsibilities and works. This makes her inactive and idle who has lots of time to think negatively.

Her household is run by the servants around, leaving her idle and more tuned to developing her neurosis. The lack of activity thus renders her unoccupied and more conductive to mental nervousness and anxieties. 8
Maya has always dreamt of a beautiful life, full of enjoyment in which she is loved and taken care of but when she comes to know the reality after living with her husband, she becomes depressed and frustrated as the world of her aspirations falls apart. Due to this situation an anxiety originates in her mind, and she begins to lose her sanity. This causes neurosis in Maya.

Maya’s childlessness is also a reason of her neurotic tendency. Not only sexual frustration but childlessness also develops neurotic anxiety in Maya. Maya’s despair or disappointment causes the final disaster. Anita Desai has described the mind of a neurotic woman Maya skillfully with the use of weird animal imagery and description of nature that reveal the disturbed state of mind. In the novel, we see that Maya tells,

Do not take too seriously what I write now, for I cannot quite recall whether these conversations, these episodes that I relate ever actually took place or merely occurred to me when I sat there, alone, insane, with dread. I was ill, ill. ⁹

These lines of Maya tell that she is abnormal or even in her moments of sanity she lacks mental balance. Sometimes she recalls her brother but this makes her recall the prophecy of the astrologer too. Maya is attached to her father intensely as he has always kept her like a princess of toy world, and now when she comes in contact with reality, she finds the real world so hard. In the beginning of the novel, there is a description of her pet dog, Toto’s death that she loves so much. She washes her eyes to keep away the sight of Toto’s dead body and this gives a glimpse of her neurosis. She becomes neurotic because of the
obsession with idea of immediate death. Mrs. Desai has revealed Maya's neurotic anxiety through the imagery of Kathkali dancers.

In *Cry, the Peacock* Maya, the heroine, is a neurotic young woman whose sanity is fast disintegrating under the pressures of marital discord. The temperaments of Maya and Gautama, her husband, are poles apart. Maya is ultimately driven to schizophrenia and excessive love for life drives her to murder her husband.  

One night when Gautama comes between her and the moon, she becomes crazy and in a fit of frenzy, she pushes him off the parapet and thus kills him. But soon she avows and meets to her own death. Thus, a woman of neurotic behavior for that many factors are responsible, ends not only her husband's life but also her own.

Monisha of "Voices in the City" is also an unforgettable figure in the list of neurotic characters. Monisha, the eldest of all brothers and sisters gets married to Jiban, in a conservative family where she does work for everyone but she has nobody who can take care of her understanding her desires and hobbies. After her marriage in a tradition bound family, Monisha feels isolated and frustrated. Her loneliness turns her neurotic, and finally she ends her life by burning herself.

Yes, Monisha is neurotic but what are the causes behind her neurotic behavior? She belongs to a small village surrounded by beauty but she gets married in a very big city "Calcutta", and there she finds her life with her in-laws suffocating. Although she has been given a separate room, she has no privacy at all.
Monisha’s ill-matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility and the stress of living in joint family with an insensitive husband push her to the breaking point and she commits suicide by self-immolation. 11

Not only one but also many factors are responsible for Monisha’s neurotic anxiety. She seems to be unsatisfied in her own house as her husband is so insensitive that he doesn’t understand her inner frustration and loneliness. Monisha can’t be called insane but it is true that because of her mental stress, she is not totally normal. Actually Monisha is so sensitive that she fails to adjust in her in-laws’ house or she becomes unable in adjusting in her husband’s house or in suffocating atmosphere of her joint family. Now the contrast between Maya and Monisha is interesting. While Maya pines for living with her in-laws, Monisha’s case is different. She has no privacy in her house because of her in-laws and she feels suffocated with them.

The strict discipline of her family and lack of communication with her husband make Monisha alienated and depressed. With the time, this alienation and depression verging on neurosis overcome her. She doesn’t seem to be simple woman who can adjust in any atmosphere. Her husband Jiban seems to have lack of understanding the conjugal life and this makes Monisha think that she is unwanted, unloved and rejected one. This thinking is also responsible for her neurotic tendency. She gets no sympathy and consideration from her husband and other members of the family.
In the novel, we come to know that she realizes,

There is no escape from it, she becomes a sleepwalker, ghost, some unknown and dreaded entity.  

Being neurotic she thinks that she has a choice between death and mean existence. From a sensitive girl, she has turned into a neurotic woman who writes diary although she hates the women who write diary. In Mrs. Desai's words,

Her head __ was like that of a stuffed ragdoll with a very white face, nodding insecurely on its neck, its eyebrows and mouth painted unnaturally dark. 

Her own words indicate that she is suffering from neurotic anxiety. One other reason of her neurosis is her sterility or childlessness. Since she has no child, she doesn't have anything to live for. In this aspect she is similar to Maya. Her sisters-in-law come in her room and keep on talking about her blocked tubes. They never care about Monisha's feelings and privacy. Sterility is a pathetic point of her life but it is discussed openly before her. The discussion and dissection of her in-laws to find out the reason of her inability to conceive that is her private self, seems to be disgusting to her.

Monisha is fond of reading books and has her small library but everybody neglects it and her reading that is not liked by Monisha.

Once she is accused of stealing money from her husband's pocket by her in-laws but the matter becomes worse when her husband doesn't support her but her in-laws or his own family members. This upsets her deeply. Thus, she is not satisfied in her house and being unable to adjust there, she burns herself to death.
The circumstances against her thinking create a depression in her and when she can’t cope with this depression, she has nervous breakdown and she commits suicide.

Imprisoned in a huge oppressive joint family the childless young Monisha’s claustrophobia and exasperation culminate in the frantic fits of frenzy and hallucination leading her to suicide. 14

In this way, Monisha, educated in the Western system and belonging to the upper class society, moves to a joint family, and her surroundings are now totally alien to her. Now her own life is not in her control, and she begins to feel suffocated in her house for her husband is insensitive who doesn’t take care of her. She feels the lack of privacy and suffers from sterility. Some events of her life upset her. Her hobbies are not appreciated and nobody understands her. So many above factors affect her mind deeply and gradually; she becomes neurotic. Her neurotic behavior is that though she keeps silence, many questions are always running in her mind. Finally, when she has no way to survive, she has choice between death and mean existence; she chooses death and commits suicide by burning her. Not only her life but death also throws light on her neurotic tendency.

Anita Desai succeeds in bringing out Monisha’s claustrophobia, loneliness and frustration effectively. Monisha’s suicide is an escape route from claustrophobia and the oppression that have stifled her, though she realizes very late that it is a wrong route. 15
Sarah, woman protagonist of “Bye-Bye, Blackbird” can’t be called a totally neurotic woman character but the depiction of her psyche or mental state by Mrs. Desai shows that she is aggravated and forlorn in her own country. The main reason of this dissatisfaction is that she has married an Indian, Adit and now as she becomes a wife of an Indian, she is not accepted in her own country. The Indian people like Adit and his friend, Dev who live in America and feel to be rejected, have a hope that they will be treated well in India but Sarah who is not being accepted in her own native, how will she be accepted in India?

Sarah has to play two roles in her life. She is Mrs. Sen in her school, an English woman and she is Adit’s wife in her house, wife of an Indian where she cooks curry with spices and listens Indian music. This double role in life makes her schizophrenic when she tries continuously to mediate the two opposing demands of her life’s circumstances. Sarah is such type of woman who shares the joys and sorrows of others and hides her own anguish.

In Bye-Bye, Blackbird Sarah is presented as a sensitive and reserved person. She suffers from agonies when Adit, her husband, reveals the credulous side of his character to invite scorn and pity from her relatives, friends, colleagues and acquaintances.  

In this way Sarah is not content or satisfied in her life as she has no permanent identity. She tries to live in Indian style according to her husband but outside her house comments are passed on her and she is not totally accepted by the people of her country as she has married an Indian.
In the novel, the fluctuation of Dev between certainty and uncertainty can’t be ignored but Sarah’s predicament is very intense or more intense than that of Dev. And its reason is very simple that Adit and Dev can take guarantee of the fact that they will be accepted completely in their native land but Sarah doesn’t seem to be accepted by her own people as she is living with an Indian husband. This is why she is fighting a battle in her mind and doesn’t show any eagerness to meet her parents.

She is constantly and perennially under tension which makes her life unreal, that is why she is affected by tortures of anxiety and insecurity. 

It is true that she doesn’t show any symptom of neurosis as she never tries to commit suicide, she doesn’t murder or even hurt her husband thinking that he is responsible for her loss of identity as an English woman and she doesn’t try to escape the circumstances she lives in. Above acts are the tragic ends of Anita Desai’s other female characters like Monisha and Maya. No, Sarah doesn’t do any of such things but this doesn’t mean that she is satisfied. Although she pretends to be happy and keeps silence, she is frustrated mainly because of loss of her identity. She doesn’t show any eagerness or enthusiasm in meeting her people even her parents, and I think that it is a symptom of her neurotic anxiety. All the time she is worried, feeling unwanted by her own countrymen, lonely and frustrated. The second chapter of this novel describes her confusion, the hypnologic state of her mind and her perplexed mental state.

Sita, woman protagonist of “Where Shall We Go This Summer?” is mother of four children and she becomes neurotic during her fifth pregnancy. She
is distressed by the violence of this world and wants to keep her child unborn. She wants to keep her child away from the ugliness and harsh realities of world but on the other side; she doesn’t want to abort her child. This fact about her shows her neurotic behavior. Anita Desai has portrayed Sita in her struggle when she seeks neurotic solution of her problem.

Like Maya, many factors are present in Sita’s life that are responsible for her neurotic anxiety. She also seems to be highly sensitive and just like Maya, she is alienated from her husband who is busy in his own life and hasn’t time for his wife. She suffers from the pangs of a fragmented matrimonial relationship. Sita is a middle-aged woman who finds this world so harsh and full of violence. One favouring fact of her life is that though her in-laws are placid, they are adjustable and don’t complain against her. But some incidents of her life make her anxious. Her attitude seems to be neurotic while considering Raman’s guests as animals, she reacts neurotically against them. Enacting a fighting scene from a film when her sons fight, she becomes upset. Menaka’s tearing away her drawings and Ayah’s fighting upset her. Her inability to save the eagle and keep it alive maddens her. The everyday news about war in Vietnam ruffles her. These things show that she is unable to connect her inner and outer world.

In this novel Desai’s characters suffer from various complexes and psychic diseases. Anita Desai shows her depth in human nature by delineating the gradual change of a trait into a psyche block which undertakes the form of a disease, making her characters neurotic. 18
Sita and Raman have a difference in their temperaments so they don’t have harmonious relationship and Sita feels unsatisfied in her relationship with Raman. She can’t share her frustration and her thinking with her husband and this becomes a reason later of her neurotic tendency. In this novel, we find a different form of neuroticism that the neurotic character Sita doesn’t want to give birth to her child. Actually she is badly affected by the brutality and violence of the world. This causes neurotic anxiety in her, and because of this thinking she wants to keep her child inside, away from the ugly realities of outer world.

Looking at her life formally, we can think that Sita is a middle-aged woman with four children and leading a comfortable and contented life in Bombay. But in reality, she seems to be seeking escape from the harsh realities of world. Some events seen by her have affected her mind deeply. When she sees the crows scavenging the eagle, she tries hard to protect it from them, and her inability or failure in saving the eagle makes her upset. The event accosts her with the reality of inevitable death. The most memorable event of her life is the scene of an old man caressing a young woman. This shocks her deeply and she compares it with her own relationship with her husband. These events, her negative thinking about the world and her disharmonious relationship with her husband turn her neurotic.

She (Sita) becomes the victim of neurosis that destroys her mental equilibrium and threatens her sanity till she decides to run away to Manori Island, seeking the miracle that will give her the power of not giving birth.19
When Sita becomes unable to adjust in this world that is full of violence, she decides to move to Manori Island with her children where she believes that she can keep her fifth child unborn as she thinks that it is a miraculous island. And she does it. Hers this decision and action indicate to her neurosis. Her illogical thinking shows that she is lacking mental balance. She runs away to Manori Island where she wants to seek the miracle that will give her power of keeping the child unborn or of not giving birth. Though she doesn’t take any fatal action, her step of going to Manori Island proves that she is suffering from neurotic anxiety.

Having reached in Manori Island, she comes to know that no miracle works now there as many years ago, when her father wielded great power through his supposed magic-spell. There is no solid reason of her neurotic behavior as she has already four children and good and adjustable in-laws who don’t complain against her. Even when she starts smoking openly, nobody scolds her or complains against her. Her habit of smoking seems to be a trait of her neurotic behavior.

She (Sita) takes to smoking and neurotic outbursts obviously as a result of growing incompatibility and unbearable fever and fret of urban domesticity. 20

Thus, to conclude we may consider that Sita is a desperate woman for whom to control her nausea and hysteria is impossible. She is always in confusion and feeling a fright. Her isolation in her own family, her awareness of the
violence in the world and different nature of her husband and children drive her to a miserable plight and turn her neurotic.

In portraying the character of Nanda Kaul as a woman who has denigrated the patriarchal status of a grandmother to that of a mere nomenclature, Anita Desai is handling a character who is more psychologically neurotic and existentially inadequate. 21

Nanda Kaul, wife of Mr. Kaul who is a vice-chancellor in a university, is the lonely woman living in a big family in the novel “Fire on the Mountain”. She doesn’t seem to be normal when she wishes to live alone far away from her children. It is due to some facts. Main reason of her abnormality is that her husband, Mr. Kaul keeps a life-long affair with Miss Davidson, the mathematics mistress whom he hasn’t married as she is a Christian. However, it causes grief for Nanda Kaul. She has many unwanted and unloved children. She never shows any sign of agony or anguish to anyone and performs all of her duties regularly. But she always longs for loneliness and seclusion and wants to be away from her children. R.K. Gupta says,

Mr. Kaul keeps his beloved Miss. Davidson, a teaching staff. Nanda Kaul becomes a mother of several unwanted, unloved children. In spite of this, to her, everything appears to be sooth outwardly but inwardly she burns with the fire of suffocation and frustration. 22

Yes, it is true that she feels very suffocated and frustrated with her own family. She is perplexed to live in seclusion. So after her husband’s death, she settles in Carignano where she enjoys her loneliness and seclusion. She is very
delighted to live alone and doesn’t want anyone disturb her. She doesn’t like her old friend Illa Das’s visit to her. In this way, though she doesn’t overreact in any of her circumstances and can’t be called insane, it is true that she behaves abnormally sometimes like that she becomes anxious hearing about her great granddaughter Raka’s arrival. She thinks that it will be a hindrance in her loneliness.

The other female character of this novel is Nanda Kaul’s granddaughter Tara who is Raka’s mother. According to R.K. Gupta,

Her (Nanda Kaul’s) granddaughter Tara suffers from chronic nervous collapse as an outcome of marital incoherence. A mode of Tara’s neurosis comes out clearly through Asha’s letter. 23

In other words, in the novel we come to know that Tara is very despondent and unsatisfied in her married life. She suffers continuously from her maladjusted marriage. This is the main and only reason of her neurotic anxiety. Consequently, she has to suffer horrible destiny of a primitive neurotic breakdown.

Anita Desai presents the abnormal behavior of a small girl through Raka due to some different facts of her life. Since her very childhood, she has been looking the endless quarrels of her parents. Unfortunately this has left a scar on her tender sensibilities. Raka is like her great grandmother as she is solitary and lonesome child.

In this way, Mrs. Desai has presented various degrees of neurosis or different neurotic behavior through the various female characters- Nanda Kaul, Tara and Raka. Their neurotic behaviors are totally different. While Tara suffers
from nervous breakdown due to her maladjusted marriage, Nanda Kaul and Raka become lonesome and frustrated as a result of opposite circumstances of their lives.

Anita Desai's novels have generally been occupied with neurosis in individuals. Maya, Nirode, Sita, Sarah, Nanda Kaul, Raka, Baumgartner—all have shown symptoms of varying degrees of neurosis, novel after novel. *Fasting, Feasting* is no exception to this. After being rejected in the marriage market, Uma feels disillusioned with life. 24

The novel *Fasting, Feasting* shows how a girl child is rejected by parents, how she craves for parental love and affection and how in spite of doing all her duties well, in the end she gets isolation and frustration which create a horrible sense of trauma and other psychosomatic diseases in her.

Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* is the eldest daughter of her family who is always rejected by her parents. She is called out from her school to take care of her younger brother Arun. Thus, since childhood she has been given an inferior place to her brother. She seems to be craving for love and affection of her parents but unluckily she doesn’t get it throughout her life. This makes her frustrated and suffocated. She is not accepted even by her husband after her marriage and she is forced to go back to her parents' house where she has never been pleased and satisfied. Uma always starves for real affection and care but she is always deprived of it. She wants to search her own identity but she never succeeds in acquiring the wholeness as she is trapped in her house.
Uma's life is full of denials and frustrations, full of *bark howls messages and silence*. She had nothing to call her own, not even her own life. 25

It can't be denied that Uma has no freedom to do anything or right to take decision not even related to her own life. These limits and this slavery have upset her and she suffers regularly from a mental anguish. This innocent girl has no choice and unfortunately choices are denied to her by her parents, not by her fate. The novel tells us how Uma leads a life of suffocation and suffering which is both physical and mental. Pining and starving for parental love and care, this girl has always performed all her duties well and done all domestic works but in the end, we see that she gets nothing. She gets treatment of rejection in her own house. Besides the isolation and frustration of her life, there develops a sense of trauma and other psychosomatic diseases in her. In other words, she suffers from neurotic anxiety.

In both the countries, Uma, Arun and Melanie find themselves starved of real care and affection that help them to grow up into wholeness, to acquire their identity and selfhood. They are trapped human beings the trappings of the family and culture. 26

By the study of this novel, we come to know that not only Uma but also some other characters of the novel are frustrated and suffer from neurotic anxiety. After Uma, we can take Melanie who also seems to be neurotic. She feels the lack of care given to her, and when someone feels something strongly and silently, one becomes neurotic. And it happens to Melanie. She starts behaving abnormally but nobody notices it as everyone in the family is busy in one’s own affair. This
makes her lonely. She feels frustration and suffocation with her family members. Her neurosis can be seen in her behavior. Her habits of eating and the style of living suggest that she is suffering from neurotic anxiety due to some facts of her life.

Melanie, less capable of absorbing neurosis due to lack of spiritual and moral strength, has to resort to treatment for neurosis in an institution in Berkshires. 27

In this way, Anita Desai has compared the neurotic anxiety or neurotic behavior of two girls living in India and abroad. And she has done it in a single novel *Fasting, Feasting*. Thus, the characters of this novel, Uma and Melanie show the symptoms of different degrees of neurosis, and Mrs. Desai has presented it artistically in this very novel.

After discussing different neurotic women characters of Anita Desai’s novels separately, we come to know that these are only sensitive females in the beginning but the opposite circumstances of their lives make them neurotic. The neurosis in different characters is developed due to varying reasons, and these protagonists also behave differently in their neurotic tendency. The causes of the neurotic behavior of Mrs. Desai’s women characters differ and their responses towards the problems of life also vary. While some woman becomes neurotic due to her maladjusted marriage, other can suffer mentally because of her sterility or childlessness. Besides this somebody can behave neurotically because of harsh realities of this violent world and other can be neurotic as the result of her non-adjustment in an alien culture. While the cause of neurotic anxiety in some
characters is loss of privacy, other one can have neurotic anxiety on account of loneliness. Lack of understanding in husband and want of love and care of the family generally create neurotic anxiety in women and they begin to behave neurotically.

In most of her novels, we have felt that her women characters who are sensitive and find the real world different from their dream-world begin to behave abnormally. Basically they are not insane but the conditions create an anxiety and agony in their minds, and when they suffer from this anxiety continuously, they become frustrated and feel suffocated. This frustration in life makes the women neurotic. Now they suffer from neurotic anxiety and don’t have any control on their actions. Different characters show the symptoms of varying degrees of neurotic anxiety in Anita Desai’s novels.

Anita Desai’s women - be it Maya, Aunt Mira or the child Raka - are rendered ineffective and devitalized by their cultured orientation, upbringing, dominance and the lack of love of others. What ensues is the total dependence, lack of confidence, harassment and the ultimate insanity or the craziness. 28

About Anita Desai’s women characters, it has been said that they have near-neurotic quality about them. Basically, there are always some reasons of their neurotic anxiety. It should be known firstly what prompts these women to reject the present system or pattern. They are not lonely since their childhood but they are unable to adjust in this world and loneliness imposed on them. In short, their neurotic behavior is not the cause of their loneliness but it is the effect of
their loneliness and humiliation. When the women are left alone, ignored and humiliated, they become lonely and suffer from neurotic anxiety.

It is found in her novels that on one side, women desire to be close and attached to their husbands but on the other side, their husbands behave in a detached manner or begin to preach them. This situation creates depression in the women. When the woman is sensitive, she suffers from depression and this depression causes mental breakdown. Their neurotic anxiety becomes unbearable to them and they take wrong steps to come out of this problem. Mrs. Desai has taken Indian families in her novels where a woman’s relationship with her family is more important than her own welfare. Anita Desai has shown in her novels that when familial binding-force is missing, the woman begins to quest or search for linkage. This search for affiliation creates difficult emotional problems for women and consequently, they begin to behave neurotically.

All the marriages in Anita Desai’s novels are more or less business transactions. .......... But sometimes this peaceful order is caused violently, the shadow batters its head against the iron fists of its owner and manages to leave a few blood stains, a wife revolts, runs away, commits suicide, becomes murderer, finds a great deal of freedom in blessed widowhood and the message is given and received, the “Great No” is said at last. 29

We can see that most of Mrs. Desai’s women suffer from neurotic anxiety due to their maladjusted marriages. Their husbands are busy men either in their profession or in society and don’t give proper time and care to their wives.
Consequently, they begin to feel themselves unwanted, rejected and unloved. And this causes neurosis in them. Desai’s women aspire for harmony always but unluckily they never get it.

The base of neurosis in India is that every individual is compelled by the society to repress one’s instinctual quality. If someone is weak and sensitive, one becomes frustrated and shows neurotic tendency. If a woman lacks subservience and compliance, she behaves abnormally. This insanity or abnormality is a result of oppression in male-dominated society. Depression in women is developed due to many factors but when a woman suffers from depression with helplessness, it results in madness. This makes the woman crazy or insane. These facts have been shown well in Anita Desai’s novels. She has taken several women characters of different nature and sensibility through whom she has presented many reasons of neurotic anxiety and varying behaviors the neurotic women show in their insanity.

Like the factors that cause neurotic anxiety, the effects and neurotic behavior of Mrs. Desai’s women characters can’t be left without discussion. The women who suffer from neurotic anxiety are always eager to find out a solution of their problems. They vary in their thinking and so the steps they take to overcome their problems, are also not similar.

Characters in the novels of Mrs. Desai are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive but sequestered in a world of dream and imagination and alienated from their surroundings as a consequent of their failure or unwillingness to adjust with the reality. They often differ in their opinion
from others and embark on a long voyage of contemplation in order to find the meaning of their existence. 30

Some of Mrs. Desai’s characters who are sensitive like Maya of Cry, the Peacock move far away from normal life in their neurotic anxiety. They have no control on their lives and actions. We have seen that in the end Maya murders her husband by pushing him down from the roof in a fit of frenzy. Some other characters show an opposite neurotic behavior. When they are compelled to suffer the misery and strain of life silently and they feel it impossible to survive, they don’t hesitate to end their lives like Monisha who ends her life by burning herself on account of unbearable suffering caused by varying miserable circumstances of her life. Not only this is fact but it is also true that some characters of Mrs. Desai’s novels are affected soberly by neurosis. During their neurotic suffering, they come to know many truths about the world. Finally, they find a feeling of fulfillment in their relation to world. Sita of Where Shall We Go This Summer and Uma of Fasting, Feasting make valuable discoveries about them during their neurosis and don’t take any wrong step in their life.

In this way, when a person is under the control of mental process, he\she becomes a subject to neurosis or hysteria. Mrs. Desai’s women characters suffer due to different factors and when this suffering is continuous, they become neurotic. Yes, during their neurosis their behavior becomes abnormal. In some cases, this neurotic anxiety is developed to an extent that the characters become crazy, insane or mad.
Some of Desai’s characters suffer from various complexes and psychic diseases. Therefore, some traits in their temperaments which, when developed out of proportion with the rest, check the healthy growth of personality. Anita Desai shows her depth in human nature by depicting the gradual conversion of a trait into characters neurotic.  

The intolerable tensions of life in her women characters result in hopelessness and frustration. To escape this suffering, they long for death. The fears and oppression of their desires create an anxiety in them that causes neurosis. Neurotic tendency of an individual expresses her distrust for the world. Anita Desai’s female characters seem to know well that since they have to do against their will, they have to suffer. When they are not consulted in any matter, they feel unwanted and rejected. Due to this situation, they adopt a tendency towards neurotic behavior and violence and they are obsessed with the idea of death. Generally, Anita Desai’s novels are occupied with neurosis in her characters. Not only one but also many characters have shown the symptoms of varying degrees of neurosis and all the characters differ in their neurotic behavior.

As we have observed that most of Mrs. Desai’s women are emotional and hypersensitive, the small or little things of this world affect them to the heart. They are emotionally total dependent on others, and others can be their husbands, their fathers or anyone else. They lack the confidence in them and become scared of opposing situation or even of small problem of life. When they are unable to make adjustment with others, they begin to feel alone and alienated from the outer world, and this is when they start living in their own imaginative world where
there is nobody besides them. After some time these situations throw them into neurosis and they begin to behave abnormally.

Their neurosis comes out in different ways in varying characters. Some of them show total insanity or craziness while some others get affected by neurotic diseases. Nervous breakdown is also a characteristic of neurosis and this has been shown through some characters of Mrs. Desai.

Anita Desai’s women characters are under so much mental stress due to various factors that they can’t be called insane or mad but they behave abnormally. They are sensitive to the brutality and harsh realities of the world. Many factors together drive her women into neurotic anxiety.

The issue of female neuroticism, a popular subject in feminism, is handled by Anita Desai with sensitivity and moving lyricism.\textsuperscript{32}

Above statement of Anuradha Roy is completely true. Anita Desai has depicted the feminine psyche of neurotic women through her various women characters. She probes into the human psyche deeply and depicts the human nature. She depicts artistically how a trait changes into psychic block and then it takes the form of a disease and makes the characters neurotic. Mrs. Desai explores the emotional world of sensitive women who turn neurotic at last. Her depiction of the inner world of women becomes more interesting because her women characters are neurotic.

In this way, Anita Desai is an outstanding novelist who has composed a lot of literature on neurotic characters, neurosis and its reasons and effects. She depicts the inner predicament of neurotic women artistically. In her novels from
Cry, the Peacock to Fasting, Feasting, she has taken different kind of women through whom she has presented neurotic behavior of various women whose opinions are different. In these novels, the factors that are responsible for neurosis have been depicted. She has depicted various neurotic behaviors and deep neurotic anxiety in her novels proficiently.
Notes and References


