CHAPTER III
SYMBOLS IN ANITA DESAI - CLASSIFICATION

3.1 Psychological Symbols
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A symbol is a figure of speech. It has the literal and suggested meanings which are joined together. Retaining its identity it may bring other images also, the same way as a cross or a trishul, besides being metallic objects, stand respectively for Christianity and Hinduism as well. Symbol has concrete referents in this objective world. The function of symbol is to suggest various implications beyond itself. A symbol can also be defined as the fusion of physical reality with the inner world. The use of symbols not only enriches a work of art and the depiction of a character but provides the very lifeblood, the soul to it, and compensates for its other deficiencies. (Srivastava, 1917 : 137)

Anita Desai has picturesquely presented the symbolic world of her fiction, the themes of despair, death desolation and sociopsychic fragmentation. What is important for her "is the movement of the wing one tries to capture, not the bird." (Ibid)

Symbols help Desai reveal her protagonists' psyche. As Wimsatt and Brooks (Pathak, 1990 : 101) suggest, "every colour, sound, odour, emotion and every visual image has its correspondence" in traits of human self. The 'cry of peacock', or 'the city of death' Calcutta, or 'the locale of Manori
island' or 'sleepy Mirpur' Desai has used them symbolically. What is still more interesting is her use of colour symbols, which convey "the awareness of a confusing duality of existence." The two dominant colours in 'Cry, The Peacock' are black and white. Red is symbolic of Maya's craving for a colourful life. It also suggests the underlying streak of violence. As Maya herself admits, "a thousand drops of blood, a thousand ruby-red hommer-heads showered across" (Quoted in Pathak, 1990: 101) her vision. The white colour is indicative of drabness and indifference on one hand and weirdness and fragility on the other. In 'Voices In The City', however, scenes and characters have been presented in terms of black or dark. We have in it "dark wintry evening", "black browed" Monisha, dark-complexioned Jit, wearing dark glasses, "night turning.... blood black", and so on. The dark colour signifies the stifling atmosphere of the household and also a purposeless journey in life culminating in death. Black has been accentuated occasionally with streaks of white." (Pathak, 1990: 101) "Everything is dark", shouted Sita loudly, in 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?'. She finds her Manori house "pitch dark" with its "crowded darkness inside"; (P. 27) and "Below them was the shifting, sighing darkness of the palm leaf leading down... to
the sand dunes and the sea." (P. 27). Thus the use of symbols is an important aspect of Desai's fictional art.

Anita Desai's novels abound in symbols through which she tries to capture and concretize a wide range of experience. She has large variety of these symbols which she uses with consummate skill. They lend a vividness to the situations she tries to describe, the characters she delineates and the events she narrates. Because of her use of condensed symbol, her art comes close to a painter's. This mode of perception and expression proves useful to her. (Amin, 1989 : 226) Her symbols evoke a sense of harshness of sound that grates on one's ears, of colours that are loud gaudy. Through such symbols, she tries to express the harshness and violence and hostility that her characters experience in their daily lives. Thus her symbols convey the reality. She also projects very skilfully the adverse effect of noise on her character's mental make up. (Amin, 1989 : 229)

"Most of Anita Desai's characters experience the terror of the mysterious, the fear of an evil force lurking around them, the dread of living in a hostile world. This consciousness is expressed through symbols of birds, insects, vipers, cobras, bats, owls, jackals, nightjars, lizards, iguanas, apes, langurs (73)
and gibbons which are mentioned frequently in her novels. Even birds like eagles, hawks and kites are used to express the ferocity and rapacity that are a part of both human and natural worlds." (Amin, 1989 : 230)

Her skill in handling the symbols is originated from her experience in life, as she says, "Long ago I knew of snakes that coil themselves around the sweet-smelling sandalwood trees of the forest. Queen of the Night attracts snakes too, and tuberoses. All white flowers, chaste sweet white flowers, luring the snakes to their hearts of scent. And they come, the snakes, they come slithering towards these virgins of the night, with only their small cold eyes glinting in the dark, and they cling to the bending stalk, and with forked tongues lash and lash again at the heart of innocence." (Quoted in Amin, 1989 : 231)

Anita Desai evokes a sense of eerie also through the use of symbols. Her symbols reveal the character’s inmost thoughts and speaks a lot about her own character. "Most of the characters also exhibit a sense of being trapped irrevocably in various circumstances." (Amin, 1989 : 235). Words like "tunnel", "net", "cobweb", "snare", "hedge", "cage", "tomb"
are abundant in all the novels. They evoke a sense of captivity which the characters experience." (Ibid.)

Anita Desai, while writing her novels, uses certain images again and again and that, although real, they acquire the significance of symbols. The use of iterative images and symbols, however, lends density to her fictional world and compensates for the absence of action or variety of characters. Her symbols and private mythology bring her close to the existential philosophy. Her craft consists in creation and manipulation of scenes. While characterising protagonists and elucidating their various psychic states, obsessions and predicaments. Symbolic implications are developed by her.

Desai has generously employed symbol on a criterion of aesthetic rather than casual relevance. This added remarkably to the textural density that is not noticeable in the works of other Indian-English novelists. Desai has a high imaginative power and artistic capacity for control and selection.

Anita Desai's use of animal images shows her mastery of narration. Very powerful and perturbing animal images have an undeniable influences on the main motif
Desai's novels abounds in striking symbols of the flowers and fruits that not only reflect a sense of regeneration in nature but also reveal Desai's superb poetic sensibility and her acute awareness of the delicacy, and beauty. Her novels are filled with numerous passages of exquisite lyrical beauty that proudly bear comparison with some of the most memorable poetic passages of D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolfs who have considerably influenced and inspired her.

The powerful dance symbols have been artistically employed in the novel to convey a sense of growing fatality to the very rhythm of the novel. For example, in her 'Cry, The Peacock, the familiar image of the dancing Shiva signifies liberation of souls out of the puzzling existentialist predicament in which Maya is trapped. In Maya's memory the image of Shiva invokes in her a shloka about Natraj:

"I caught a sight of the bronze Shiva, dancing just a shade outside the ring of lamplight, so that the gleam of its outfluing limbs and the circle of flames was steady, fixed. Ant yet ............ movement." (P. 203)
The symbols of violence, prey and predator repeats itself very remarkably in some of Desai's novels. In 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?', Sita's obstinate aversion to the birth of her fifth baby "so safely contained" in her "in a violent, pain-wracked" (P. 55) world is decidedly symbolic of her desire to prevent the very cycle of painful experiences that cause suffering to others. "It became unthinkable that anything should happen for happenings were always violent." (Ibid.) It is admitted that destruction may be the true element in which life survives and creation merely a freak, temporary, and doomed event.

Desai proves to be equally remarkable in the use of symbols and images in the novels specially in 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?' Manori, surrounded by the waves of the sea, is symbolic of time with its flux and fixity. The island symbolically projects the very psyche of Sita and is also symbolic of those archetypal urges which motivate us to seek a separate unique identity of our own. The sea also becomes symbolic of the mystic unknown between the polarity of city and island. The city is symbolic of a rational way of life while the island is symbolic of the primitive reality that Sita discovers. Thus the author has chosen the sea and the island as two
most dominant symbols throughout the theme of the novel.
(Cf. Dash, 2000 : 201)

Thus, Anita Desai has very skilfully used the symbols of characters, animals, birds and other natural and man-made objects. Her symbols have a vital role to play in displaying different states and situations. She has very beautifully used the symbols in her novels 'Cry, The Peacock', 'Where Shall We Go This Summer', 'Fire On The Mountain', 'Baumgartner's Bombay', 'Voices In The City', 'Clear Light of Day', 'In Custody', and 'Village By The Sea'. We can classify her symbols in different groups, such as: Moral, Cultural, Social, Psychological, Natural, Gestural, etc.

3.1 Psychological Symbols

Anita Desai has very successfully portrayed the psyche of her characters. She uses perfect symbols for it. She has analyzed the psychological conflicts faced by the characters in depth by way of using appropriate symbols.

In Anita Desai's novel, 'Where Shall We Go This Summer ?', the house exposes the battered and fractured self of Sita. It also projects her wish to withdraw into an isolated and illusory world of impregnable silence and quiet move-
ments. The house serves as a symbol of perfection. The island of Manori is the symbol of Sita's marooned life. She returns to the island but its inhabitants go on, completely forget her and not aware of her presence. She remains isolated from the island till the very end, an "island on the island". (Swain, 2000 : 154) The island mirrors Sita's alienated plight, its abandonment. Desai delineates the conflict in Sita's life through the image of a crowd of crows attacking a wounded eagle. This trivial incident is the symbol of Sita's alienation from her husband.

In 'Cry, The Peacock', the image of the "sapless and sere neem tree" and the image of "the silk-cotten trees" whose "huge, scarlet blooms" were "squashed into soft yellowish miasma" (P. 34) symbolise the inner voice and isolation of a childless housewife Maya. The images of petunias and lemon blossoms suggest the temperamental isolation between Gautama and Maya. "In Baumgartner's Bombay', the image of entrapment and encagement "had provided Baumgartner with an escape from the fate of those in Germany and safety from the anarchy of the world outside." (Swain, 2000 : 142) In 'Voices In The City' light and dark imagery, an extension of colour imagery explores the dim and dark corridors of the souls of
Nirode and Monisha. In 'Clear Light of Day', the mosquito is the symbol of despair and isolation of Bimla:

"They had come like mosquitoes Tara and Bakul, and behind them the Mirrors and somewhere in the distance Raja and Benazir only to torment her and mosquito-like sip her blood." (Swain, 2000: 141) The derelict and blackened house in, 'In Custody' reveals Deven's marital isolation and conjugal chaos leading to insanity.

3.2 Cultural Symbols: Religious and Mythical Symbols

The underlying theme and structure of Desai's novels are made more significant through the use of the typical pattern of Indian culture in terms of symbols.

In Desai's 'Where Shall We Go This Summer ?', Sita and Raman are the symbols of mythical Rama and Sita. The mythical Rama is the caricatured character of Raman. Both Ram and Raman rarely show emotion and love for their wives and they face the reality of life. This is one of the reasons why both the Sitas suffer. For Sita, escape seems almost inevitable or she has to face a life of slow suicide without her identity and self. To her, her father is her all, who still casts

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a spell over her: "He had been a wizard, she accepted that now, her father. He had cast an illusion as a fisherman casts a net upon a flock of fish in the sea." (P. 100) He is a picture of her personal myth, a personal dream, to which her childhood belongs and future still gnaws at for refuse and for self-identification. (Meitel, 2000: 36)

In 'Cry, The Peacock', Gautam's name is a symbol of Gautama Buddha, who as Siddartha had renounced his wife and child in his quest of solving larger issues of life. For Harish Raizada, Gautama's name "symbolises asceticism, detachment from life." (Srivastava, : 1997 : 137) Maya's name is symbolic of Maya (illusion) because she gives weightage to insubstantial and illusory things, and finds comfort in bogus ceremonies and frivolities. Maya's name symbolically "stands for the world of sensations." Maya herself calls it "only a dream, an illusion. Maya - my very name means nothing, is nothing but an illusion." (P. 175)

3.3 **Moral Symbols**

'Moral' is concerned with standards and principles of right and wrong behaviour.

In 'Where Shall We Go This Summer ?', while
returning from holiday at Ajanta and Ellora caves, Raman and Sita come across a tall, blonde, young foreigner who wants a lift to Ajanta. Raman thinks that the foreigner is a fool who didn't know which side of the road to wait on. But he seemed very brave to Sita. She says that it was not his foolishness but innocence "and it made him seem more brave, not knowing anything but going on nevertheless." (P. 52) Sita identified herself with the foreigner because like her he is so vulnerable - vulnerable to violence and criticism in the society but practical Raman had already dismissed him as a fool. (Ibid.) Small common place incidents like the playful fighting of ayahs, Maneka's breaking new buds on the plant or tearing her paintings are representations of violence to Sita. Another such situation is the sight of a young Muslim woman in the lap of an old man in the Hanging Gardens. It is an unworthy sight, a perfect work of art.

3.4 Natural Symbols

Nature in Anita Desai's fiction plays a significant role in shaping the feelings and attitudes of the protagonists. It acts both as a metaphor of hope and life and as an ironical device.
In 'Where Shall We Go This Summer ?', the confusion and chaos in Sita's mind has been symbolised through the image of the monsoon winds:

"The monsoon flowed now thin, now dense; now slow, now fast; now whispering, now drumming; then gusting. There was never silence - always the roar and sign of tide, the moon of casuarinas in the grove below, tossed and hurled about in grey, tattered billows, the clatter of palm leaves that hung their ragged fingers down and made channels for the rain to spout down onto the roof." (P. 102)

The symbolic image of the jelly fish highlights Sita's involvement and her consequent alienation Sita's identification with the jelly fish suggests her cast-away and ship-wrecked self.

Sita feels:

Desai's extraordinarily rich lyricism is the one that so beautifully portrays the clouds during a break in the monsoon:

"Then the solidity of the cloud ceiling ..... Sita and the children went out on the terrace to watch the massed clouds ....." (P. 119)
The island in this novel denotes numerous symbolic images one among which echoes the theme of human vulnerability and the resultant conflicting demands of protection and independence. Though Sita looks to the island for protection; she gets from the island only a cold welcome with the islanders' way of talking to her and the palms "hissing and clattering their dry leaves together harshly, like some disturbed, vigilant animals ...." (P. 26)

"Perhaps I am only the jelly fish washed up by the waves, stranded there on the sand-bar. I was just stranded here by the sea that's all. I had not much to do with it all she sadly admitted, with that black, stripped truthfulness that she could never colour or coat." (P. 152)

The symbolic image of the moon in 'Bye-Bye, Blackbird' points to Dev's existentialist predicament and his feeling of silence and stillness of estrangement in England. (Swain, 2000 : 152) In 'Clear Light of Day' Gardens are the symbol of pattern and order and also symbolise wild and uncontrolled life (Swain 2000 : 205) The landscape image is the symbol of Deven's dry and drab existence, his imprisoned life in, 'In Custody'. In 'Fire On The Mountain' the image of the "yellow rose-creeper" symbolises the wilting and weakness

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of Nanda Kaul's hope for a cloistered life. (Swain, 2000 : 133) The sound of the birds that carries with it the sensation of solitude is symbol of echo of Raka's own voice crying for isolation.

In 'Baumgartner's Bombay', Hugo Baumgartner's isolation is portrayed through the symbol of the 'fir-tree': "... he did not belong to the picture-book world of the fir-tree ...." (Swain, 2000 : 133) In 'Voices In The City', 'weed', is the symbol of dehumanisation of Nirode. He is "a dripping gargoyle, grotesque, offensive, comic." (Swain, 2000 : 135) Amla's longing to flee is expressed through the symbol of the horses bursting forth to release themselves from the massed impatience and the lust of the mob. The horses symbolise the possibility of isolation and escape from the pressures of conformity. (Swain, 2000 : 137)

3.5 **Social Symbols**

'Social' is connected with society and the way it is organized. There are so many incidents in the novels of Anita Desai which depict the characters' relationships with the society around them and social reality.

In 'Where Shall We Go This Summer', the house is
the symbol of the pale and melancholic psychic life of Sita. In Bombay, she lived in a flat on a height, but now isolating herself from the noise, crowd of people and sudden noisy excitement around, she retreats to the house built by her father in Manori Island. She has the desire to set the house right but she discovers, to her amazement, the house abandoned in a sorry and awful state: "a waste of ashes she saw, the cold remains of the bonfire her father had lit here to a blaze. Ashes, white and waste. Dust lay as casually as sound on a beach, spider webs spanned the corners of the unfurnished room like skeletal palm leaves. The odour was of bats and silences boomed like the silence of under-sea caves. It had no air of providing shelter from the sea or the beach .... it was as much a natural part of them as an abandoned shell or lump of twisted driftwood." (P. 28)

In 'Fire On The Mountain', we have an image of the whirlpool that points to Nanda Kaul's incarceration and staticity: "..... life would swirl on again, in an eddy, a whirlpool of which she was the still, fixed eye in the centre." The image of the burnt house "at the top of the hill", reflects the wild and uncontrolled nature of Raka with her irrepressible attraction towards "the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in
Kasauli." In 'Baumgartner's Bombay' the house serves as a symbol of society of that time. Baumgartner's "old, crowded, slum-like house off free street school steel, in the lane too narrow for traffic but wide enough for people, pigs, stray dogs, even a few intrepid rickshaws" serves as a contrast to the European quarter he had known before the war, its great houses with deep verandahs and green shutters, high walls and tall palms ------. In 'Voices In The City', vacant, thinking, wanting more money, ogre and monster city gobbles Monisha, while it leaves the remaining two - Nirode and Amla - awfully battered and shattered. The solitary rickshaw, 'heroically mobile amidst all the waterlogged vehicle is a symbol of the 'single-handed struggle' of Nirode in the suffocating atmosphere of the city. (Swain, 2000 : 138)

In, 'Bye-Bye, Blackbird', the symbolic image of the city points to the lacking of existence. The silence of emptiness of the houses and streets of London make Dev uneasy. The insincerity of the city bewilders him: "the houses and blocks of flats, streets and squares and crescents - the English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut-off guarding their privacy - It remains incomprehensible to him." (Swain, 2000 : 139). In 'Village By the Sea', Han's
house in the village Thul, is a symbol of neglect and abandon­
ment. (Swain, 2000 : 147)

"The hut should have been rethatched years ago
------- the old palm leaves were dry and tattered and slipping
of the beams."

3.6 Gestural Symbols

'Gestural' means a movement that somebody makes
with man's head and face to show a particular meaning. Gestural
symbols require a moment by moment physical monitoring of
speech event for their interpretation. There are a few words in
Anita Desai's novels that have been used gesturally.

In 'Where Shall We Go This Summer', at last, Sita
understands that she cannot say great 'No' - mentioned in the
poem of Cavafy that had for ever been carved on her mind.
She is a failure. Raman who has come to the island is
unconvinced by her argument and reasons for her comming to
the island and as he prepares to leave again for the main land,
Sita feels insecure and unprotected. Tired, she fallows the trail
of foot-prints of Raman that he had laid out for her : "she
lowered her head and searched out his foot-prints so that she
could place her feet in them, as a kind of game to make

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walking back easier and so her foot-prints mingled with his ----." (P. 150) This gesture of Sita reveals her acceptance of values of society around her and her return to conformity. She decides to accept the prose of life.

In another incident, when Moses said, "The memshib is coming", then the others cried in disbelief. Ali said, "She hasn't come for twenty years." "What would she want to come now for after Moses has let almost the whole house fall down?" (P. 9) Then "Moses lifted the corner of his upper lip and snarled, showing teeth like mahjeng counters made of old bamboo." (Ibid.) This gesture of Moses reveals his anger.

"In Desai's novels, we come across a symbolic link between different images, which form an interface, a common bond. Symbol is primarily used to capture and crystallise a wide range of experiences. Most of the symbols are sharply condensed and having clear strong features that they resemble a piece of painting." (Swain, 2000 : 155)

"The symbols of isolation, at times, overlap with the lyrical and rhythmic splendour of the novels. They are simple but histrionically powerful." Highly functional, they form
an essential part of the fiction. They are seldom decorative but they reveal a world inside, a world of the inner weather. They help to maintain the dominant mood of the novel throughout the succession of parts, and set up a fundamental identity between the form and the content, the space and the time.

Anita Desai's symbols are natural and contextual. In the words of Madhusudan Prasad, "Desai's imagery which is chiefly anticipatory, pre-figurative or demonstrative in nature is always considerably functional ----. Lusciously lyrical, her image patterns are singularised by interrelatedness and continuity." (Quoted in Swain, 2000 : 156). Desai's writing functions through sensory symbols. The symbols of destruction and violence portray the difficult and sad situation of the protagonist that cannot be changed and driven towards self-effacement and self-destruction. Desai's symbols trace the growth of the self from a state of extremely discontent and despair to a state of psychic submission and spiritual consolation. Thus Desai's symbols are very significant because of the appropriate correlation between the object and its symbolic meaning. Her symbolistic technique is the sole ingredient of her art.
References


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