CHAPTER VI
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The novels of Anita Desai depict unresolvable conflicts in the inner configuration of the individual - the dissonance between reason and instinct, the will and reality, participation and detachment. These conflicts revolve around the interplay of the “being” with those around who seemingly valorise the worth of the being and inhibit the self-image of the subject in the strange metonymy of relationship with the others.

The Protagonists of Anita Desai refuse to be passive victims and merely survive, giving into oppressive and regressive forces. Anita Desai’s women are all individuals - capable of intelligence and feeling. They suffer because of their strong feel of their right to be acknowledged as individuals who can better their own personal existence. This makes them contemplative of their plight and fight against the general and accepted norms. For e.g. Nanda Kaul is a traditional wife in the sense of being self-sacrificing, obedient and devoted to her husband and children. Her husband’s extra-marital relation makes her a rebel. Realizing that she is caught in a maze of incomprehensive and apathetic marriage, all she aims at is detachment.

Anita Desai’s fiction not only portrays agony and suffering but also an acquiescence of life. Her vision of life encompasses defeat and disillusionment on one hand, acceptance and affirmation on the other. The major thematic focuses of Anita Desai are marital disharmony, interpersonal relationship and withdrawal, obsession with death and violence, boredom and unfulfilled emotional life and a quest for self-identity. For e.g. Baumgartner’s Bombay is Hugo and Lotte’s quest and journey through
emptiness and isolation on an alien land with a tragic end in failure, frustration and
disgust. *Cry, the peacock* reveals Maya’s failure to comprehend a man’s mind and
grow out of her childhood world to take up adult responsibilities. *Where shall we go this summer?* portrays the feeling of boredom and meaningless existence experienced by a middle-aged woman, who is always in search of something. Having no clear idea of this something she turns into a wanderer. The major thematic focuses of Mrs. Desai’s last three novels reveal a marked change - a process of living that starts in suffering and ends in purgation. *Clear Light of Day, In Custody* and *The Village by the Sea* seems to be giving an advice to adapt oneself according to the changing times. Her later novels - *In Custody, Baumgartners Bombay* and *Journey to Ithaca* reveals the fact that the emphasis has shifted from the internal to the external. These novels paint more of action with a chain of events, one leading to another, which bring the protagonist on the verge of ruin. Besides, her earlier novels have been mostly about the elite class of the society; her woman protagonists are intellectual and sophisticated being of urban culture. She now shows preference for ordinary middle class person living in semi-urban or urban places. Deven belongs to Mirpore and Baumgartner lives first in Calcutta and later in Bombay until his death. Matteo, *Journey to Ithaca* shuttles between Italy and India to taste the nectar of spirituality. *Journey to Ithaca*, published in the year 1995 is a moving account of Matteo’s nagging sense of alienation and his conflict-ridden living in his endeavour gain the essence of spirituality. This young Italian protagonist, born in an affluent family leaves all comforts and luxury in search of something beyond his tedious existence. He comes to India to find spiritual enlightenment in the ashrams of India. To find wisdom and contentment in spite of his best efforts, he falls into the grip of disintegration within and without
Matteo leaves his down to earth, practical and materialistic wife Sophie and lands in mother's asharam - the realm of holy faith. For the first time he gets a glimpse of that which unites the mundane and the divine. His new refuge becomes a protest to renounce his worldly duties as a husband:

"Listen in her presence I feel I am more alive... Her presence heightens and illuminates the experience of living as no one else's does... when I leave her I feel I am falling, down into the darkness."

Sophie suspects Matteo's love for the mother. This infuriates Matteo and he calls Sophie a destroyer:

You are trying to destroy me by destroying the only part that has any value.\(^2\)

An explosion of anger creates a permanent discord in Matteo and Sophie's relationship. To clarify his connection with the Mother he says:

"I have given myself to her. Why do you want to keep me, Sophie from pursuing my belief."\(^3\)

Matteo's quest for spirituality comes to stand point when the Mother dies. His failure in realizing the divine fills him with anguish and frustration. Consequently, he awakes to the immensity of his failure and suffering and the mess he had made of his life. He is oppressed with the thought of living with the same misery till the close of his journey on the physical plane.

There is also a marked change in the general tone of the novels. Her earlier novels are characterized by a quantity of introversion. The inner world of thoughts and emotions of her characters are the primary concerns. A note of despair characterizes all of Desai's earlier novels due to a flaw in their personality of the protagonists. With Maya it is her extreme sensitivity to her immeasurable loneliness
with Nirode it is his refuge to make necessary compromises that life demands; with Monisha it is her inability to get closer to her husband’s family; with Sita it is her failure in communicating with her husband; with Nanda it is her incapacity to assert her right as a wife and a mother and with Bim, her failure to behold wisdom of life. The same tone of despair continues in In Custody, Baumgartner’s Bombay and Journey to Ithaca but with a marked difference. In these three novels no such internal factor is responsible for the misery of the protagonist. Deven’s despair is caused by his failures to come out of the self-imposed trap.

There is also a noticeable change in Desai’s style of writing. A quality of lyricism and a pattern of symbols and images are not significant in the last three novels. Anita Desai unfolds Deven’s academic failure through nature reflecting and magnifying his emotions. The natural landscapes prefigures a life of increasing uncertainty and his illusory but imprisoned existence:

The impassable desert that lay between him and the capital with its lost treasure of friendships, entertainment, attractions and opportunities. It turned into the strip of no-man’s land that lies around a prison, threatening in its desolation.

The later novels reveals that Anita Desai has extended her milieu. Meenakshi Mukherjee writes that in her later novel a change:

“Towards a rendering out of human concerns and willingness to integrate concrete historical and specific cultural dimension in the creation of interior landscapes.”

In these novels the portrayal of individual experiences are delineated from the outside and not from the inside. Here the external world becomes more realistic. The novelist shows greater awareness of social reality for e.g. The village by the sea a departure from her familiar preoccupation with the problems of human psyche, presents the
pathetic existence of a poverty-ridden family. However the focus here is no longer
the urban milieu but Thul, a real village on the western coast of India. Of the three
novels - The Village by the sea and In Custody exhibit a gradual transition from a
predominating tragic vision of life to a compromising one. The Village by the sea ends
with a number of positive and promising points. Hari, after his return from Bombay
is filled with confidence he needed. He seem to be encouraged to do something in
life. His father gives up addiction to alcohol and feels sorry for becoming responsible
for their misery and pinto's death. His mother recovers after her return from Alibagh
hospital and is now happy and satisfied. Like Sita (Where shall we go this summer?)
Hari (The Village by the Sea) and Deven (In custody) accept their limitations and
compromise with their existence which is tedious or otherwise.

The later novels like Village by the Sea, In Custody, and Baumgartner's
there are references to crises relative to social and economic realms of human life. For
E.g. The violence of the world war II and the pre-partition violence are equally
victimising forces to Baumgartner as his father - figure in childhood days. Similarly
the civil war in Rhodesia is also passingly mentioned in Where shall we go this summer
?, as the Indo-Pak war in Bye-Bye Blackbird.

Desai's characters are creatures of stubborn unadoptive habits. Her
characters like - Maya, Monisha, Nanda Kaul, Sita, Deven and Sarah are all dissatisfied
in their matrimonial relationships. For Maya and Guatama, physical union is not cordial
relationship. A desire to love and to be loved - a requisite for fulfillment in human
relationships is the wisdom that evades Maya. While in the second novel, Voices in
the city Nirode's father show a stony indifferences to his talented wife by not
recongising her individuality and identity Monisha, like her father considers it her
right to evaluate herself as superior to everybody in Jiban's house and despise them as well as their mode of living. Realising her colourless relationship with Jiban she tries to maintain her individuality as her mother did forgetting that she could sublimate her thwarted expectations by concentrating on flowers, music and fine food. In Anita Desai, the notes of despair and disillusionment emanate from temperamental incompatibilities. For e.g. lack of essential wisdom makes Maya impulsive resulting in Gautama's murder. Similarly Monisha opts for self-immolation when her interaction with Jiban fails to provide a sense of fulfillment. Because these characters put individuality to prime importance their desire to live and love clash violently in them. In their pursuit to realise their individuality they search for an alternative to meaningfully relate themselves for a sense of inner peace. To some of her characters infantile mode of behaviour is a rescuing anchor from the terror of fancy sickening reality. For e.g. Sita is surrounded by magic of her father; Maya by the excessive care of an over indulgent parental attention. Raka on the other hand devoid of parental care, is surrounded by the brutality of her father and the abuses of her mother. To her childhood memories are nightmarish.

Anita Desai does not focus much on the childhood of her protagonist. Yet she reveals the unwholesome emotional conditions through flashbacks and reminiscenses to reveal the cause of their inability to establish and maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships in their later life. It also tries to confirm as to what extent childhood interaction equips an adult to relate herself in companionship. Such protagonists like Maya, Monisha, Sita and Raka grow with a coloured reality that distorts their perception of the existing forces.
Anita Desai's protagonists strive to achieve harmony by escaping from the expectations inherent in human bonds. As they are not fully healthy and reciprocative individuals they lack the vitality and aliveness of human interaction. Engulfed by an unfriendly and hostile reality, they feel emotionally estranged from the world around. They find themselves stuck up at one place in their journey to their cherished goals. Some of the protagonists like Sita, Nirode and Deven have no clear idea of their destination. These protagonists are like Nirode who are "unable to start on a meaningful journey to experience personal worth in togetherness. There defeat therefore fails them in making what David says in *Voices in the city* - "bridges of understanding that connect one positively to the society..." Such personal inadequacies handicap them to communicate with those inhabiting their inner and outer worlds.

Desai's protagonists being all alone and confused magnify their own failures, worries and apprehensions (See Fig. 6.1, 6.2). Lack of communication makes Maya live with such a load of secrets that Gautama fails to fathom the intensity of her trauma. Like Maya, Monisha and Sarla too, favour silence. Nanda vows to live exclusively in a desolate place to detach herself from the world of "bags and messages and demands". This deprives them of mental affinity and understanding leading to abysmal depth of misery. Nirode, Monisha, Raka, Sita and Bim suffer from the poignancy of emotional deprivation: Nanda suffers the agony of a rejected wife, a mother and a grandmother; Bim suffers from want of passion and emotion; Sita suffers because of hopeless disappointment in the trap of marital life. Likewise Hugo suffers due to neglect of his father. Deprived of emotional security, he wonders in search of a home. No wonder these characters find it difficult to cope with their reality within and without which pose a great threat to their emotional health.
Desai's characters although crushed under the weight of unbalanced relationship make every possible effort to preserve their sense of security and well-being. Deven, Sita, Bim and Nanda succeed in coming out from endless musings and confront the threat of dissatisfying conditions. Sita realises the importance of marital bliss well in time and opts for togetherness. Nanda Kaul makes a declaration that nobody wishes aloofness and detachment by personal choice - "did not live her alone by choice, she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing"... Nirode also expresses the same idea in his declaration "independence is too damned expensive"... Deven also realises the significance of life and admits his responsibilities towards Sarla and Manu. He is now a fighter and knows:

...the sun would be up and blazing. The day would begin with its calamities. They would flash out of the sky and cut him down like swords. He would run to meet them.

To escape their agonising present, they either move backward into the past and search for happiness in the memories of the days gone by or indulge in destructions and violence (See Fig__). The world of illusion is also a refuge to some of Desai's characters to resolve their tensions. Maya and Sita refuse to live fully in the present time and space. They escape into their childhood memories. Nanda Kaul, Adit, Tara, Raka, Sarah and Baba all escape into time and space where as Maya and Monisha go to the extreme limit of murder and suicide. However, Sita, Bim and Deven are transformed by fantasy again a better grasp of reality.

Fantasy becomes an important narrative tool to enlighten the inner recesses of the protagonists and to weigh their mental conditions. This makes fantasy a part of the total structure and is projected in contrast to the world of reality for
e.g. Raka is beckoned to the illusory world created by Ramlal, a servant to Nanda Kaul. He tells her about the fancy dream ball where men and women were colourfully dressed as Princes and Queens. Believing this make-belief story, she goes to the club to find to her dismay only “madmen and rioters”. This takes her back to her childhood memories - the morbid world of her parents. Deven in In Custody is allured into the world of fantasy which consists in hopes of confirmation and promotion in the College. It also promises through successful accomplishment of his literary projects enough procurement of money. Unfortunately his infinite toil to get the interview of Nur leaves him completely shattered. In the hour of despair borne out of his self-scrutiny, he indulges in self-pity:

And that was all he was - a trapped animal... a close familiarity with the poet had shown him that what he had thought of as “the wider world” was an illusion too...

Ultimately, he realises his identity as well as his worth and plunges into the throes of life as one who is ready to face reality unflinchingly with all its concomitant problems. Art, Deven realises eventually, is not separable from life - the very stuff of life with all its ordinary, meaningless routine acts. Like The Village by the Sea, and Clear Light of Day, the novel ends on a note of hope and optimism. In sum, Anita Desai relates the perplexing experiences of man and woman to a feeling that is hard to bear and difficult to reconcile.

The world of illusions juxtaposed with the world of reality also paints the change of perspective in the realization of reality. The protagonist of Desai turn “inward” and speak to themselves in the long hours of her silence. With what Arnold Kettle ‘calls’ a mode of recollection”, Desai dramatises the innermost feelings of the protagonist Maya as
All order is gone out of my life, all formality. There is no plan, no peace nothing to keep within the patterns of familiar, everyday living and during that becomes those whom god means to live on earth.  

With this soliloquy of Maya which reveals her obsession with meaningless and loveless existence, we get a glimpse of her private and introspective world. This also reveals how a protagonist of Anita Desai closes the door of the world of participation upon herself and thus reveals what makes or unmakes life. The novel offers a vista of the dimensions of the consciousness that constitute the ‘being’ of the protagonist. However, a character in a novel is a fictional entity and is embedded in the structure of narrative. Thus, what we make of the ‘mind-set’ of the protagonists is underpinned by the narrative stance. This is brought out by the interplay of perspectives: namely external perspective and internal perspective. The external perspective or point-of-view carves and situates the protagonist in the story. It is a narrative mode that makes it explicit how one is to view the situations and doings unfolded in the novel. For example Nanda Kaul’s predicament is described by the author as:

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, the Mathematics mistress whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children—the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice — she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing.

This passage vividly reveals the traumatic experience of life of Nanda Kaul—the frustration and agony experienced in the web of interpersonal relationship. It shadows the emotional deprivation of Nanda and her disillusionment with all emotional ties.
whether matrimonial or filial. The seclusion of Carignano echoes her life full of disappointments and betrayals which she confronts stoically and gracefully.

The internal perspective on the other hand plays out the thoughts and attitudes in short, the mind-set of the protagonists. This is a narrative device that frames and colours the inner recesses of the protagonists. For example in the passage below we read that Nanda Kaul finds her life dull, monotonous, absurd and incompatible with her cherished privacy. Unhappily, she plays the gracious hostess and conforms to the social status of the wife of a dignitary.

There had been too many guests coming and going, tongas and rickshaws piled under the eucalyptus trees and the bougainvillas, their drives asleep on the seats with their feet hanging over the bars. The many rooms of the house had always been full, extra beds would have had to be made up often in not very private corners of the hall or veranda, so that there was a shortage of privacy that vexed her. Too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband’s study, to her mother in law’s bedroom, to the veranda that was the gathering-place for all at all times of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after.¹⁴

This passage emphasises on growing burdens of duty and the stifling sensations that started unnerving her. “Too many Guests”, “Too many trays” and “Too much to wash up later” have irritated her. The image of the tea-party reflects the psyche of the protagonist - Nanda Kaul as it embodies her point of view.

Language is never a transparent medium. The protagonist is not mapped out and cast in a definitive mould. Much remains elusive. The art of the novelist makes the portrayal convincing. This is a textual artefact. It is a textual strategy that lends vividness to setting of situation and the character. It is language that shapes the mind-style of the protagonist for example if we study the expressions and epithets used
by Nanda Kaul for the postman, wives and the daughters of the lecturers and professors over whom her husband ruled, it becomes quite clear as to why Nanda withdraws into a barren surrounding, she refers to the postman as "oafish ox", "a bullock man" and "honest bull". The latter are described as crawling grey bugs". It indicates that life is not pleasing to Nanda and it is as insignificant as 'bugs' and as burdensome as the higher animals like 'an ox' or 'a bull'. It also suggests her insensitivity and lack of individuality.

The above analysis of her novels undoubtedly establishes Anita Desai's forte in achieving a special insight into the human psyche. Her intricate and sensitive style is most suited to echo the reactions and ruminations of minds of her characters-conscious or unconscious. By having a narrator heroine, or employing an observer-speaker, she convincingly manifests the various spheres of human existence. The despair of the lost, the boredom of the domestic duties, the erosion of human compassion, the joy and frustrations of every day hum-drums reflect the contingent reality in an artistic way.
REFERENCES


2. Ibid., P.142.

3. Ibid., P.160.


9. In Custody, P.204.

10. Ibid., P.153.


