FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI: A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY

ABSTRACT
SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Supervised By:
Dr. Gunjan Sushil
Department of English
University of Allahabad.

Submitted by:
Seema Chauhan
Research Scholar

U.P. RAJARSHI TANDON OPEN UNIVERSITY
ALLAHABAD (U.P.)
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THESIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the emergence of the feminine sensibility as a concept of reality in the fictional world of Anita Desai. She is one of the most recognized figures in Indo-Anglian fiction. The present work attempts to analyse the psychological study in the novels of Anita Desai. I have chosen Anita Desai for my research work because she has laid emphasis not only on women character's but on men also.

I have chosen the Psycho Analytical Method for my thesis because it is interesting to study how complex a human mind is and how differently different characters react to the same situation. The novels which I have selected in my thesis are *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, *Clear Light of Day*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *In Custody* etc. have remarkably exposed the evidence of Desai's awareness of several problems related to woman, which she has tried to tackle from a psychological point of view. After reading her novels I found that she emerges as an artist of exceptional ability in studying and expressing the feminine sensibility in an adequate form.

In 'Introduction' I have discussed Anita Desai’s literary career which started from 1963 with the publication of her novel *Cry, the Peacock*. Her first novel quickly established her reputation as a novelist more concerned with psychological
exploration of her intensely traumatized protagonist than with direct representation of social reality. After reading some of her novels I feel that Desai’s skill in capturing the psychological states of women haunted by an awareness of death Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock* is a very sensitive woman who suffers from neurotic fears about her possible death and also her marital disharmony. *Voices in the City* is a novel which deals with the characters that are psychologically affected, particularly Nirode and Monisha who are both very sensitive. In this novel Desai delves deep into human psyche and tries to explore the domains of the conscious and subconscious of the major characters. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* she portrays Indians and Englishmen in England with their problems, both physical and psychological. Adit and Sarah both suffer from problems such as loss of identity, alienation and humiliation largely on account of racial and cultural prejudices. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The central character, Sita is a very sensitive, peace, loving and an introvert. The tension in this novel is between a sensitive individual and an insensitive world. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai penetrates deep into the psyche of Nanda Kaul who has withdrawn herself from the rest of the world. *Clear Light of Day*, concerned with time in relation with eternity is a domain of psychological novel. In *Village by the Sea* is an Indian family story. Here I have discussed the predicament of Hari in terms of his desire to shed his old identity of a poor fisher-boy and replace it with that of a rich and successful person. So here
the cyclical pattern of the narrative is a frequently used strategy of the novelist. Through it she affirms the possibility of the individual’s attitudinal change that can allow him to put a different interpretation on the same facts and move out of self-deluding mental constructs. *In Custody* makes a study of the psyche of Deven who is unable to reconcile the dual personalities of the poet Nur. This novel deals with the tragic-comic predicament of Deven Sharma a self-effacing college lecturer. Here my analysis tries to show how he has to discard unrealistic expectations in pursuit of his ideal of self-fulfillment. Deven swings between idealistic dreams and disillusionment, and his forging of a new identity through an acceptance of his own strengths and weaknesses. *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, explores the self-destructive characteristics that do not allow an individual to assume control of his own destiny. In this novel, I have attempted to analyse Baumgartner’s failure to lead a productive existence in terms of Desai’s philosophical vision that validated both assertion and compromise. Anita Desai has excelled particularly in highlighting the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women tortured by isolation and loneliness.

The second chapter delineates the recurring themes in the novels of Anita Desai. The most recurring themes in all her novels are the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism. By dividing the chapter into two
parts i.e. Depressed women and assertive women, I have tried to present the plight of introspective, hypersensitive women in her novels.

The third chapter deals with the male-female dichotomy in the novels of Anita Desai, in multi-dimensional perspectives. The male-female relationship is not necessarily pleasant and perhaps that explains the presence of psychic tension in all her novels.

In the fourth chapter entitled marital discord in *Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City and Where Shall We Go This Summer?* through these novels I have analyzed the behaviour of the protagonists. The novel, *Cry, the Peacock* is a family drama mainly concerned with the theme of marital discord between Gautama and Maya. The story is about Maya’s cry for love and relationship in her loveless wedding with Gautama; the peacock’s cry is an implication of Maya’s anguished cry for love and life of involvement.

In *Voices in the City* I have highlighted Nirode’s intellectual hollowness and Monisha’s dissatisfaction with the marital relationship as a reflection of their fear of attachment which involves human beings in the complex rituals of give and take. Here Monisha’s predicament offers an important insight into the plight of the urban, educated woman restless within the confines of the traditional marital relationship, yet lacking the
strength of desire to make a clean break. Here I feel that the woman doesn't really contemplate total change but work towards a compromise.

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is a family plot depicting the marital discord between a sensitive wife Sita and the rational husband Raman. Here Sita’s psychic plight too is similar to that of Maya and Monisha. She is also oppressed and depressed in a loveless marriage with Raman.

The interaction between past and present is a typical narrative device which Desai has used to convey the constant mental activity that characterizes human being and also compensates for the limited external action. Sita’s compromise marks a progression from Maya’s insanity and Monisha’s suicide brings the narrative’s philosophical approach to existence more into evidence, an approach that recommends a synthesis of emotion and intellect.

The fifth chapter, namely psychological conflict in *Bye-Bye Blackbird, Clear Light of Day and Fire on the Mountain* this chapter is the main forte of her fiction in the exploration of the main currents and undercurrents of human psyche. The protagonists of these novels were undergoing mental conflicts of varying intensity. Some of them are lost during the struggle while others come out successfully with new realization and hope.
The psychologists believe that every individual has different states of mind which produce a different reaction in different situations. The world of Desai’s characters is an amalgamation of all types of human psyche. The sweet Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Nanda and the unfortunate Ila in *Fire on the Mountain* and optimistic Bim in *Clear Light of Day* also suffer from mental agonies at various levels. These novels are replete with the instances of psychological conflict.

In conclusion of my thesis I have not only discussed the feminine psychological problems but also mention the male psychological problems, such as Deven, Raman and Hari etc. So it is amply clear that the motif of psychological study was present in most of Anita Desai’s novels.

There are so many writers in India like Kamla-Markandaya, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayana and Shashi Deshpandey etc. who forge their own styles. These writers particularly share the experience of general women and transmute these experiences in their fictions. The problems which they saw in their surroundings like male-dominated problems at home and different work places in the society all come up in their discussion for these women writers. So these writers have pinpointed some of these problems and conveyed them to critics to find a solution. But among of these Indian female writers only Anita Desai is the first writer who has forcefully expressed the
existential problems of both women and men. She is the first to introduce the deep psychological probing of her characters. Her fictional world is located in the corridors of human consciousness. She portrays her characters in the verge of psychological breakdown.

To conclude I can say that the feeling of sensitivity, thought, intelligence has attracted most extensive critical attention in India and abroad. She uses her power sensibilities to observe a life and combines the same with her artistic vision to create memorable characters. She is a subjective writer and portrays her characters individually. Her individuality and sensitivity differentiates her from other writers.