

**ALIENATED PSYCHE OF FEMALE INDIVIDUALS IN SELECT NOVELS OF
ANITA DESAI**

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ABSTRACT

Indian English literature is the outcome of two great literatures-Indian and English. It voices the yearnings and emotions of Indians in a realistic and vibrant way. The twentieth century has been called the age of alienation. The modern man is doomed to suffer the corrosive impact of alienation which manifests itself variously in the form of generation gap, the compartmentalization of life, a sense of meaninglessness and so on. Man suffers not only from wars, persecution, famine, and ruin, but also from inner problems-isolation, randomness, and meaninglessness. Alienation has become a major cause for man's pathetic condition.

Alienation is not alien to Indian English fiction. It has emerged as a concept only after the influence of the Western philosophers like Hegel, Luduig Feuerback, Karl Marx, Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, Satre, and Albert Camus. It became a recurrent theme in Indo-English novels during 1960s. O.P.Saxena says, "Alienation serves as a basic theme and recurrent motif in many Indo-English novels. It is undoubtedly the most dominant trait of several characters delineated in them" (72).

Anita Desai is one of the major Indian English novelists dealing with the theme of modern women's predicament in India. Like Jane Austen, she exposes the mental miseries of her characters in a realistic way. She exhibits the feelings of women in a better way than many other writers. This article talks about the alienated psyche of female individuals in Anita Desai's novels namely *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, and *Fire on the Mountain*.

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The word 'Alienation' means 'separation of self from others'. It is a certain psychological state of a normal person isolated from other persons, any group or institution or belief. It is more concerned with psyche than with body. It is also used to explain ethnic prejudices, mental illness, class consciousness, and extremism. Other related concepts of alienation are meaninglessness, rootlessness, and powerlessness.

Alienation is subcategorized into many types. Self-alienation is the loss of contact of the individual selves with others. It causes schizoid state of being. In psychological alienation, the individual experiences himself as an alien. It causes psychological pain including anger and depression. Social alienation is the feeling of disconnection from the values, norms, practices, and society or environment. It leads to isolation and loneliness.

Alienation serves as an apt tool in expressing human problems and dilemmas. Anita Desai has used the stream-of-consciousness technique effectively for exposing the various temperaments of her characters. Anita Desai is a great Indian English novelist who has earned world-wide reputation as novelist of alienation. She is a legend in portraying the acute alienation of her voiceless characters. Her portrayals are exceptionally remarkable and phenomenal. Alienation and its effects on the lives of her characters is the common link in most of her novels. Anita Desai's men and women are not exceptional heroes and heroines who stand apart from the normal human beings, but normal men and women who are absolute in their strength with all human weaknesses.

Anita Desai's female protagonists are in everlasting pursuit for a consequential life. Anita Desai states that all her writing is an effort to discover and underline the significance of life (64). Her protagonists suffer because they are not happy with the people around them in their lives and they feel they are left devoid of any poignant contact, compassionate companion, and care and concern. Husband-wife alienation predominates in many of her novels. Many of her novels are tragedies of conflicting temperaments culminating in murder,

suicide, or divorce. Depression, sex, household responsibilities, large family circle, and high expectation are the factors which lead to marital discord. Moreover, mental disturbance, severe dejection, a feeling of hopelessness and inadequacy alienate her female protagonists from their families and society.

Alienation, in the novels of Anita Desai, is more related to the emotional and mental moods of her characters than with their spiritual, moral or ethical temperaments. They are highly emotional who rebel against monotony, injustice, and humiliation. They can create hell in heaven and heaven in hell in their own ways. Anita Desai explores the mental imbalance of her characters-Maya's masochism, Monisha's neurosis, Sita's regression, and Nandha Kaul's detachment from responsibility-in detail in her novels.

Cry the Peacock is the story of an alienated woman's longing for love and fulfillment in life. The title symbolically suggests Maya's agonized cry for a life of involvement. Maya and Gautama are temperamentally opposite to each other. Maya is a young, sensitive, and imaginative girl. Like a true epicurean, she wants to "drink life to the lees" (www.poetryfoundation.org). But Gautama, her husband is twice the age of Maya. He is a sober lawyer who always practices asceticism and detachment from life. This irreconcilably different temperaments and disparity between them are the prime causes for Maya's alienation.

Being a motherless child and childless wife, Maya passionately craves for love and care from her husband. But to her dismay, the new family treats with disdain the basic emotions of love and affection. She is neglected, isolated, and alienated in her own home. Her inner conflict causes fissures in her personality. This leads her to schizoid state of being and culminates in schizophrenia. Maya's preoccupation with death had been actually planted long ago in her childhood by the albino astrologer's prophecy foretelling of the death of either of the couple after marriage. She, being intensely in love with life, turns hysteric over the creeping fear of death. "Am I gone insane. Father, Brother, Husband. Who is my savior? I am in need one. I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no I'll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore. Only death and waiting" (98).

Tortured by a sense of neglect from her husband and obsessed by a childhood prophesy of disaster, Maya finds life miserable and horrible. She murmurs, "All order is gone out of my life ... no peace, nothing to keep me within the pattern of familiar everyday living and

doing that becomes those whom God means to live on earth. Past, Present, Future. Truth and untruth ...” (179-180). Out of insanity, she kills Gautama and commits suicide. The mental incompatibility and martial disharmony are the root causes of Maya’s alienation. *Cry, the Peacock* clearly exposes the consequence of alienation in the life of a helplessly sensitive character caught in the crisis of incompatibility and insecurity.

Voices in the City is the tragic story of Monisha which is similar to the story of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* as both deal with the theme of martial disharmony and its resultant alienation which leads to suicide. In *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai clearly shows how orthodox family and city culture restrict the freedom and privacy of unsatisfied and alienated people living in an unkind city, Calcutta.

Monisha is a young and sensitive woman who always craves for freedom and privacy. But in a joint family, the freedom and privacy is a dream that could not be realized. She is a self-actualizing individual. She loves reading books and her thirst is intellectual. On the other hand, Jiban, her husband, is a dull and prosaic person who believes in the orthodox role of woman like cutting vegetables, serving food, brushing the children hair and the others in the family also do not believe in freedom and privacy for women.

Alienation of Monisha has produced a negative impact on her psyche. Jiban’s loveless behaviour, orthodox views, unresponsive nature, and insensitive attitude are responsible for Monisha’s acute sense of alienation. It leads her to a psychological mindset in which she starts feeling inadequate and sees the world as unfit to live in. To her at least non-existence has some meaning instead of living a life of emptiness and isolation. Like Maya, she too commits suicide. Her suicide symbolizes an educated woman’s protest against tyranny and hollowness in life. In short, she is destroyed but not defeated.

In Monisha’s life as well as in Maya’s life the basic needs of personal security, intimacy, and lustful satisfaction are denied to them by their pragmatic husbands. Thus they are neglected and completely alienated from their husbands, in-laws, and the outside world. They feel themselves as caged birds unable to sing the song of freedom. Meena Shirwadkar states, “Traditionally, the Indian woman accepted the framework of the family with a blind faith and rarely showed a rebellious trend. She continued to be docile, self-sacrificing, patient, loving and capable of suffering. ... They suffer, submit and adjust themselves to circumstances” (11).

Where Shall We Go This Summer? is the story of an alienated woman's despair with family and the violent society. Sita's perception and attitude towards life is entirely different from those of all the other characters of Anita Desai. Unlike Maya and Monisha who are childless, Sita is a mother of four children and loves to bear children. She has become a victim of alienation owing to her loveless and lonely childhood experiences. Her formative years have been those of rifts and dissensions with the only companionship of loneliness.

Sita's husband Raman is a businessman, realistic and having pragmatic view about life whereas Sita is ultrasensitive, keen eyed, poetic, and imaginative. This temperamental difference causes a split between them. Moreover, her sense of alienation and despair is further increased by other domestic and social incidents. She feels it tedious to live in the city because there is nothing authentic but only dullness and hopeless disappointment. She intends not to deliver her child in this violent world. She decides to go to Manori, the magical land. But she feels that the power and beauty of Manori has faded away and instead of miracle, Sita experiences only mental misery. She realizes the difference between illusion and reality. She changes her mind and prepares to accompany Raman to normal life. Her compromise symbolizes her awareness that reality, though hard to bear, is better than a life with false illusions.

Fire on the Mountain is the story of two desperate recluses, Nandha Kaul and Raka, who want to live a life of solitude and stillness. Nanda Kaul is the oldest of all female characters of Anita Desai. She is a sardonic feminist who dislikes matriarchal role. She has devoted all her time for the welfare of her family. She stands as the epitome of duty and devotion. But the family betrays her. Her husband's illegal love affair with Miss David and her sons' disloyal makes her upset. They consider her as only an object. She broods over the futility of her past existence. Physically she feels tired and mentally alienates herself. She wants to live her life for herself at least for the rest of her life.

Most of Anita Desai's protagonists have not been accompanied with proper parental care and affection. As a child, they experience only solitude and bitterness. This experience combined with their congenital hypersensitive nature contributes towards their inability to maintain a healthy interpersonal relationship with the outside world. Jasbir Jain remarks:

They (protagonists) either disown or are disowned by their families. Maya's only memory of her mother in *Cry the Peacock* is the photograph on her father's desk

(134); the Ray children in *Voices in the City* all four of them are alienated in different degrees from their mother, Sita's mother in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* had run away from home. A similar withdrawal is there on part of Sarah in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. The children in *Clear Light of Day* resent the long absence of their parents. (113-114)

Raka is such a victim of broken family. Her formative years have witnessed bitterness, distrust, and violence. This creates fear, insecurity, and anxiety in her. She starts disliking human beings and their civilized world. She develops a strong fascination for the forlorn and barren aspects of the nature. Nandha Kaul is shaken hard by the death news of her friend, Ila Das and brings her end. Raka's final act of setting fire to the mountain is not merely an act of violence, but an act of purification symbolizing a new beginning.

Anita Desai narrates the inner realities and psychic reverberations of her characters in her unique way. Her protagonists are torn between their socio-psychic selves and psycho emotional milieu. The aspect of loneliness and aloofness makes them anxious, fearful, and absurd. They question the factuality of their own lives as authentic or inauthentic. Some of the protagonists are forced to think death as a possible solution to their problems. This death desire can be nullified only by the inner awareness.

The renowned critic B.L.Tripathi in his book *Anita Desai Dimensions of the Inner World* has commented:

From *Cry, the Peacock* through *Fire on the Mountain* to *Fasting, Feasting*, she collectively presents a damning critique of patriarchal family and the generic role of woman as a wife and mother; the suffocating demands placed on woman, most often causing the death of their inner selves. ... Desai's writings travel across and beyond her given environment, her mores, enter into those territories of experiences that open up infinite secret zones of reality and imagination. (16)

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