

# **AGONY OF WOMEN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI: A FEMINISTIC STUDY**

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## *Chapter V*

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### **Conclusion**

Anita Desai is known for her great achievement in the galaxy of Indian English women novelists. She is one of the distinguished women writers of contemporary women writing. As a reputed writer she has enriched Indian English fiction by her creative release of feminine sensibility. After independence, she is one of the women novelists recognized as a feminist writer. She has given a new recognition to Indian English Fiction by the portrayal of one's individuality especially woman's individuality. She belongs to second generation of Indian novelist. The aspects of Indian culture are setting are skillfully dealt by her. Unlike Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan, she employs the language of the interior to highlight the inner conflicts of her women characters as well as their crises in life. She brings out a new dimension to the India novel by portraying the difficult sensibility of a woman in the male dominated world. Being a purposeful artist, she achieves her clear vision and purpose. She deals with the physical and emotional alienation of upper middle class people of society.

Anita Desai is a good blend of Indian and European sensibilities. This peculiar blend gives a vivid reflection of her spontaneous expression in her novels. It is impossible to categorize her novels under any head, because they do not fall into any category as she does not find any school of Indian novel writing in English. She finds that novel writing is a highly flexible literary genre that includes all kinds of studies such as psychology, philosophy, comedy, tragedy, criticism. The recurring themes of Anita Desai's novels are women's struggle for self-definition, women's quest for her identity and marital discord, alienation, protest against oppression at every level. Desai's female

characters are longing to be free from social and familial involvement. Her social contempt makes her to face marital disharmony.

Like Virginia Woolf, she has employed the stream of consciousness technique to explore protagonists' despairing life. She has changed the trends of Indo-Anglian Literature. Desai's women characters have sensitive nature that leads to suffer in family and in surroundings after their marriage. By adding a sensitive nature to all woman characters, Desai puts them into fear and struggle which forces them to commit suicide. She explores the alienated feelings of an individual woman in both worlds. Her women characters suffer from feminine existential problems and predicaments.

She is very closer when she explores the inner reality of her fictional characters. She has skillfully captured the very nuances of Indian woman's life. She is popular because of her poetic language, keen understanding of her characters, their problems in Indian context.

She is regarded for her lyrical language that has been presented in all her novels. In order to highlight the effectiveness of her novels, she has used poetry from the earlier period of her career. This special quality shows her identity especially from other Indo-Anglian writers. She portrays the problems of the different categories of Indian women. As a feminist writer she mainly concentrates on both the inner traumas as well as the misery of the outer life of her characters. Feminine sensibility of her women characters is ruled by a sense of characters, sacrifice and surrender. Her women characters reveal her vision of life and they are a part of her own perception of life. Her female oriented novels probe into women's problems who seem to be a mother, a daughter or a wife. Most of her

novels reveal the truth of life that pictures the women as a victim in a patriarchal and father dominated Indian family.

Desai sharply focuses on the emotional deprivation of her women characters. Her women characters are not only rebellious in nature, but sometimes they have sufficient courage to resist themselves. As a keen observer of life, she portrays life in its totality.

Shantha Krishnaswamy in her study on “The Women in Indian Fiction in English points out:

Antia Desai’s novels constitute together the documentation, through fiction, of radical female of patriarchally defined concept of normality. She finds the links between female duality, myth and psychosis female duality, myth and psychosis intriguing; each heroin is seen as searching for, finding and absorbing or annihilating the double who represents the socially impermissible aspects of her femininity. (Krishnaswamy 237)

As a writer of voiceless Indian women, she explores the disturbed psyche of the Indian woman. Her women characters indulge in self- analysis, self -discovery. Besides they compromise with the situation, some of her women characters remain in the world of illusion whereas others prefers to find a way out.

Her novels deal with tensions between family members and mental trauma of her women characters. Desai puts her characters into extreme level of tension which tempts them to commit suicide or to murder some. She has illustrated how a normal woman moves slowly into abnormal condition. All her novels focus women characters who are depicted as broken or ill-matched married women. All her feminine protagonists are quashed emotionally as well as physically by males as in the form of husband, brother, son. She has presented rebellious feminine heroines. Most of her women characters suffer

from neurotic behaviour, whether they have children or not. Though her memorable heroines are aware of their identity and stand for their rights. O. J. Thomas rightly points out in his article 'Anita Desai: A Grain of Sand in an Oyster':

Being a woman is problem. All the rules and restrictions against which little girls chafed and women grumbled about were designed only to block all routes to escape from the conventional mode of living, from 'society that beastly tomet' .... (47)

Because of man's suppression and oppression of women's feelings, woman becomes angst in her married life as well as in the society. After the post World War, each and every women faced inner conflicts, trauma in their married life as well as in the society. Desai's all feminine characters are victims of alienation as well as circumstance. Like other notable women writers such as Kamala Markkandya, Nayanthara Sahgal, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Anita Desai has gained recognition among the contemporary Indian women writers.

Problems of women were once in the periphery. But now it has shifted to the centre. Women are treated as second class citizens. Emotional world of women is explored in Desai's all her novels. Desai's sets herself to voice of the helplessness of millions of married women, who are agonized by feminine problems and predicament. her married women characters are entrapped in circumstances. In her novels Imagery is used to highlight her problems of the estranged self. Through the images emotional state of women is explored Desai uses appropriate symbols and images to express the sub conscious mind of her women characters.

Her novels are based on the splendid of images. Most of images suggest the identification as well as isolation. Desai's first novel *Cry, the Peacock* deals with the feminine predicaments of Maya. As a hyper sensitive young woman, Maya is presented as a lonely creature in absurd world. She is lonely grown up under the care of her father who develops in her a sense of isolation. From the childhood onwards, she remains separated from others. Moreover her young mind is affected by the Albino's prediction. After her marriage also, she finds emptiness in her life without children. Maya's trauma is developed because of her deprivation of sexual pleasures. Pea-hen's cry for Pea-Cock's love represents Maya's cry for Gautama's love.

Gautama's insensitive characters reinforce her agony and it pushes her to suffer loneliness, frustration as well as rejection. Her extreme feminine sensitivity suffers from immeasurable loneliness. Her emotional world of the neurotic results from marital incompatibility. Due to marital discord she laments in life. The lack of emotional communication, between Gautama and Maya leads a mechanical life. Maya feels as if she remains lonely creatures in this helpless and indifferent world. Maya experiences the mental anguish in family. Being a childless woman, Maya feels depressed by the death of her pet dog Toto. Her agonized cry for love her to become a neurotic woman. Besides the death prophecy of albino astrologer enhances her mental trauma, and deepens her sense of loneliness. Her false belief makes her to be afraid of her future life. Gautama's failure to notice her agony develops her to reach neurotic state. Being aware of her neurotic state, she is confused by the horoscope. Though she is surrounded by her family members, she herself makes her rejected and alienated soul. Her suffocating life fails to

see meaning in life. She struggles to free from the fear of death. Maya's angst is for death and for her negligence.

The childless woman prefers to find peace in her life through Gautama. But Gautama's detachment in life leads to reach permanent peace. Her fear of death and emotional, physical alienation make her to murder her husband. Her agonized heart feels for the loveless life. The patriarchal mind set of Gautama expects Maya to be a traditional, submissive, patient, tolerant and undemanding. Maya's mental agony tortures her feminine self when she is left unattended. Maya's cry is the cry of an agonized woman who torments the pangs of loneliness. Maya's hope of positive results from Gautama is crushed. Her marital discord in her life deepens her agony. Her mental agony is caused by mistrust, misunderstanding and uncompromising attitude of Gautama. Through the character of Maya, Desai brings out the truth of happy life. Maya's tragedy occurs due to her inability to face the life.

Her fear of death and emotional, physical alienation makes her to murder her husband. Then she faces death. Her pessimistic qualities lead her to death. Her feminine sensibility derives her to find permanent meaning in life. Her negative approach in life compels her to lead a life of despondency. But Maya's mother in law is very positive approach in life.

The next novel *Voices in the City* is about Monisha's silent suffering in her law's house in Calcutta. Married into a traditional Bengali family, Monisha is driven to death by the claustrophobic atmosphere. Like Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*, Monisha is treated like a non- entity and becomes a subject to severe criticism for her barrenness and is reduced to the state of unpaid servant doing all domestic chores. The central character



Monisha, being an Indian woman had to bear the male patriarchy for the sake of her to hold her married relationship before the society. That may lead her to control her anguish herself and need to be sweet and good before the others. But with a strong determination, commitment and involvement of people and organization with philanthropic motive and a rational outlook, this problem can be solved. It needs one to be open-minded and change the old mind set against women together with the constitutional and other legal provisions.

She experiences physical, moral and spiritual miseries in her in-law's house. Her shattered married life with Jiban makes her to search for real meaning in life. The communication gap between Monisha and Jiban stimulates her mental anguish which pushes her to embrace death. Both women characters Maya and Sita suffer from their failure marriage. Both characters' mean existence lead them to death which is only alternative for their agonized life.

Like Maya, Monisha in *Voices in the City* faces the trauma of childless women. She resembles quite in many ways like Maya. Like Maya, Monisha is an alienated individual, when she is alone, she consoles herself. She feels suffocated in Bengali joint family. Monisha's marriage with Jiban is failure note. Monisha's feminine self is crushed when her husband ignores her like Gautama-Maya tragedy, Monisha's marriage with Jiban sounds the death knell of personal peace and integrity. Monisha's mental trauma deepens when her barrenness. She is reduced to the state of domestic help. But she is treated like a non-entity. When her all hopes and efforts fails, she is turned to death. Her shattered married life with Jiban makes her to find freedom in life. Like Maya, Monisha feels tormented. She feels stifled. Her feminine self is destroyed in the joint family of Jiban's house. Monisha's intellectual freedom is also shattered by her in law.

Monisha's ill-matched marriage, her loneliness, strained relationship in a joint family leads her to the breaking point. Besides she commits suicide by self-immolation. The novel ends with funeral of Monisha. Monisha's situation represents the social situation of numerous represents the social situation of numerous young brides who are unable to bear endless torment and pinching behavior of the husband's family members. Like Monisha's death many young brides end up their life and commit suicide. The oppressive lack of privacy and the absence of love and understanding in her life are roots of cause of her agony. Monisha's loneliness within her family agonize thought out her life.

Like Maya, Monisha suffers from mental trauma. The communication gap between Monisha and Jiban stimulates her mental anguish. Monisha's depressed state causes her to lead isolation. Like Maya, Monisha's negative attitude pushes her to embrace death. Both women characters Maya and Sita suffer from their failure marriage. Both characters mean existence lead them to death which is only alternative for their agonized life.

The third chapter "**Domestic Distress**" investigates how women are disturbed after their marriage in Desai's two novels *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Fire on the Mountain*. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is about the acute mental trauma of middle aged pregnant women. Sita is oppressed and depressed by marital disharmony. Being a mother of four children she experiences misery and dejection. She feels like a prisoner of the house which offers hopeless disappointment.

In *Where shall We Go this Summer?* Sita is a victim of unpleasant situation. Sita's distress is blossomed because of her failure to understand the reality of life as well as her maladjustment. Being a mother of four children, she is pregnant again in her middle age.

Her disappointed life in Bombay city pushes her to rethink of her past pleasant childhood days. In search of solace from her strained life, she visits to the island Manori where she can prevent the biological process of delivery.

The temperamental incompatibility between Raman and Sita develops inner confronts. Her hope for solace in island is vanished when she faces the full of disappointments with the islanders. Finally she submits herself and prepares to face the world. She is frightened by the violence of the city. Sita's angst leads her to compare the sexual matter nearer to beasts. Unlike Monisha, Sita faces physical alienation as well as emotional alienation. Being a pregnant woman she is confused by fear of death. She is oppressed and depressed by marital and dejection. Her entrapment offers hopeless disappointment. Her disappointed life in Bombay City pushes her to rethink of her past pleasant childhood days. She remains helpless wife of Raman. Her feminine self struggles to find perfect harmony and peace in life. Though she is surrounded by her family members, she feels alienated and ignored. Her feminine self upsets even for trivial thing. Due to her hyper sensitive, she is easily disappointed in life.

She tries to find meaning in the animalistic existence of the contemporary society. She feels to the island of Manori in order to find her own existence and identity. Her adventurous journey with her children disappoints her feminine self. In search of solace from her strained life, she visit to the island Manori where her biological process of delivery can be prevented. The temporary incompatibility between Raman and Sita is the root cause of Sita's Agony. She feels frustrated when she comes to island. When she faces the full of disappointments with the islander, her all hope for solace is vanished. Through symbolism and imagery, she crystallizes the complexities of man-woman

relationship. Sita tries to find meaning in the animalistic existence of the contemporary society. She feels to the island of Manori in order to find her own existence and identity. Her adventurous journey with her children to the island is for finding her 'self' and for liberating from the mundane life. As the novelist writes:

Like Maya, she is also separate from her parents. But she gets identification by Raman. After having four children, once again she searches for her identity. Her fear of death and her unsatisfied attitude with Raman leads her to face physical alienation and emotional alienation. Later she realizes the reality of life. She compromises with life and she goes back to Bombay to handle her responsibilities. (91)

Her escape in reality causes her escape from loneliness and boredom of city life. The symbol of island 'Manori' signifies the world of innocence in contrast to animalistic city life. Sita's stay and experiences on the island awakens to a new kind of reality and she finally return with her children and her husband. In order to glorify her 'self' she reaches the island. Sita's strange desire to protect the child birth with the help of some magic is irrational and illogical. As a neglected, loveless and motherless childhood Sita torments Sita's sensibility. A sense of insecurity holds Sita's being. Though Raman provided her the desired social and psychological security, she feels completely alienated. Sita's wish for love and to be loved is not fulfilled in her marriage life. When she longs for perfect harmony, Raman turns out to be only a routine one. Sita's inability to cope with the routine city life is a great disappointment in her life.

As a young disillusioned woman, Sita is disappointed when she moves to the island of Manori with a hope. In order to cut herself off from the mainland, she leaves

from mainland, Bombay. She desperately attempts to recapture her childhood days when she felt secure in the company of her father. The name Sita suggests the suffering qualities of exiled Sita in the Ramayana. As a archetypal figure, Sita is exiled from her disillusionment with Raman as well as from false social values.

Desai delineates Sita's problem which is caused by her lack of emotional relationship with Raman.

Through the character of Sita, Desai gives a message to understand personal relationships. The novel develops the idea that it would be possible if a sensitive individual sacrifices oneself for the meaningful personal relationship.

The next novel "*Fire on the Mountain*" depicts the traumatic experience of three female characters namely Nanda Kaul, Reka, Illa Das. Domestic violence upon two major characters, Nanda Kaul, her great- grand- daughter Reka, is highlighted in this chapter. Nanda Kaul's disillusionment and her sense of being alienation throughout her life leads to her withdrawal to a solitary life.

After her husband death, she is left alone by her son and daughters. She desires to be left alone to pass the rest of her life peacefully. Her forced isolation brings stillness in her life. The aged Nanda Kaul retreats to her small house called as Carignano. As a mother she has discharged all her duties. So that she loses her interest to get mentally involved. The busy schedule of vice chancellor's wife and her innumerable household chores makes on her as neglected wife. She is encountered by her nostalgic feelings. Her past memories agonizes her. She loses her identity in her marriage life. She likes the emptiness of Carignano, where she lives alone. Her inability to shun detachment as well as her desire to get detachment torments her. Through Nanda Kaul character, It is realized

a remarkable stance of Indian Feminism which is bored with discharging her duties only as a daughter, wife or mother. Her protective shell of solitude is the result of years of waiting and practicing the routine life. Her dreadful life makes her to realize the reality of life. Her secluded life in the hills is outcome of her disgust and depression in life. Due to her nostalgic suffering and she spends her old age in isolation. Mr. Kaul is the representation of the Male dominated society. His wife silently mourns under the influence of Mr. Kaul. She feels entrapped to her home.

Though she is economically independent women, her life is full of miseries and betrayals. After she has left active life in the city, she takes refuge in Carignano. This indifference of her husband and children leads her to think of a privacy which is her only companion in her life. Though she is a victim of male dominated society, she carried her obligations. The betrayal of her husband attacks her outlook on life. It makes her distrust all attachments and affairs. Both Kaul and Raka's sufferings are related to those who belonged to them. In Nanda's case the desire for seclusion is a mask to hide her intense longing for fulfilling emotional bond. Her feminine psyche is terribly haunted by her husband's extra marital relationship. Besides the illegal affairs of her husband is source of agony in her married life.

Though she enjoys the social status of a dignitary, she feels lonely and depressed. Her husband does not provide the required attention demanded by her. Her depressed self outbursts in agony. Though she is emotionally stronger with a more balanced personality, she is wounded by the infidelity of her husband. In order to keep herself occupied in her household duties she involves in all activities. She is haunted by the external marital affair of her husband with Miss David.

She is betrayed by her husband and left neglected and ignored by her children. Her husband's illegal affair with Miss. Davidson was unbearable distress which is source of agony throughout her life. Her great granddaughter's arrival reminds her past agonized life wounds her feminine psyche.

Reka suffers from the oppressive attitude of her parents. Tara's tender psyche is affected by the misbehaviors of her parents. Her childhood happiness is crushed by the marital incompatibility of her parents.

Like Maya and Monisa, Nanda Kaul's oscillates in dilemma of detachment and non involvement. Raka's self alienation is more majestic than Nanda's withdrawal. Herself destructive isolation is result of her parents unhealthy relationship. She is psychologically alienated by her unfortunate home which changes the child insecure and isolated. Her father's illtreatment towards her mother affects her young mind.

Raka's frustration towards human activities is indicated when she sets *fire on the Mountain*. Raka's act of firing indicates her desire to destroy the patriarchal world along with nature. Raka's mother is beaten into pulp before her by her father. As a result of this Raka is bound to become maladjusted and hate company. Raka's self-destructive isolation is result of her parent's unhealthy relationship. She psychologically alienated by the unpleasant situation of the family. Like Nanda Kaul Raka's alienation reflects her frustration in life. Reka's arrival to Kausali is great disappointment to Nanda Kaul and her detachment in life is outcome of a tortured childhood.

She is utterly shattered when she learns about her friend's murder. Illa Das's service for the betterment of society is crushed by the challenging male authority. Nanda Kaul is shattered when she hears the tragic end of Illa Das who is raped and murdered by Preet

Singh who represents ill society. Illa Das faces trouble when she tries to stop the child marriage of Preet Singh daughter. She is raped and killed by the priest Preeth Singh, whose daughter is saved from the trauma of child marriage. She loses herself in her attempt to emancipate people from clutches of conservative and reactionary priest.

Desai's next two novels *Clear Light of the Day* and *Fasting Feasting* traces the life of oppressed and victimized women. The novel *Clear Light of the Day* brings out the victimization of the eldest daughter of the Das family. Bimla who is the eldest of three children is victimized by the hard situation. Unlike Maya, Monisha and Nanda Kaul who denounce marriage, family and society, the image of two sisters Bim and Tara are brought up in the unpleasant situation. All these women are formed in their suffocating life by instability and insecurity. These two sisters Bim and Tara struggle to live and exist among the poverty. Their all aspirations are thwarted by the family impediments. Bim as a girl of wounded self experiences unbearable burdens of her family. Her all ambitions are destroyed by the sudden changes in the circumstance.

She loses her life for taking care of her ailing brother Raja and aged aunt Miramasi. Bim is left alone to look after her mentally retarded brother. Bim finally overcomes her all burdens. She boldly challenges of her life such as shock of the sudden death of her parents. She is unmarried woman who differs from other heroines of Anita Desai. She bravely faces family crises. Unlike Maya, Monisha and Sita she never develops insanity nor she tries suicide to escape from the torments of life. She is the one who persists in leading her life in an unpleasant existential circumstance.

The next novel *Fasting Feasting* is about the world of Indian women. The women protagonists Uma and Aruna who live in a tradition-bound society are emotionally



victimized by their parents. Uma, the eldest daughter of Hindu family is very simple. She is affected by the oppressive bond of her parents. She faces the torture of family by overworking and her desires and dreams remains unfulfilled. Her all attempts to get little happiness are crushed by Papa and Mama. She is neglected by her own parents for being a girl child. Aruna's marital life is successful where as Uma's life is full of torture and anguish. Through the character of Uma, Desai presents social reality from the feminist point of view.

Anamika is a victim of arrange marriage. Marriage is offered to women to find suitable match. It is the destiny offered by traditional society. It is believed in our Indian Context that a girl's life. Anamika's arranged marriage causes for her destiny. Though she lives twenty- four years with her husband she does not generate any love and affection for her. She is beaten to the extent of her death. As a victim of Indian arranged marriages, she is neglected by her husband. She is a victim of patriarchal society. The conventional outlook of society vanishes Uma's desires Desai portrays the sufferings Uma in Indian Context. Uma is humiliated in the male dominated Indian Society. Uma is a victim of hypocrisy of marriage. She is victimized by her unfavourable situations in her family. As a victim of fate and a victim of her circumstances she tolerates her destiny. Though Aruna and Anamika are educated they are throttled in matrimony.

Anita Desai has highlighted the universal problems like mental tension, strained human relationship, loss of identity, marital disharmony. Mental trauma of women characters is different in different novels. Inner experience of women is valued by the external values of life. Women characters in Desai novels belong to upper class. For them the important issue is the big challenge mark for the accepted codes of patriarchal

society. They wish to love and to be loved. Her women characters have different faces. Her women character includes almost all age groups. They are not only different age groups but they are also of different types characters.

Maya is hypersensitive and Monisha is an intellectual as well as hypersensitive, Sita is a middle aged pregnant women, Mira Masi is young widow, where as Nanda Kaul and Illa Das are old women. Thus Desai has explored different aspects of feminine psyche in different novels.

Bim and Illa Das are spinsters as well as emancipated women. Every individual has agony in their life. They are in physical agony as well as mental agony. Problem is there in all women's life. Agony is caused by society, family even economically. Agony is there in everyone's life. But its dimensions may be different.

Women are expected to fulfill all the norms of society that imposed upon them. They can be an emancipated women or housewife and they are educated or uneducated. But still agony is there in their life. Women may be spinster, widowhood or even old lady. But Agony is determined in their life. Though women dislike to fulfill her duties, she is expected to discharge all the duties. If not society is always can be given by society and family. Their dimension differs from one to another. As a women wife, daughter, she has to discharge all the household works. Women who have a strong will power like Bim, Illa Das they face all the problems with courage. But those who have average will power like Uma and Mira Masi. For them life would be a challenging one. To overcome agony women should accept family relationship whether good or bad. Women cannot choose their relatives. Family and familial relationship play important role in women's life. If women's relationship is not perfect she seldom finds harmonious family.

The tragedies of Maya and Monisha occur partly by their husbands and in laws and partly due to their hypersensitive nature and egoism. Their agonies lead them to death because they find no other way to escape from the situation. Monisha is a victim of Hindu familial ideology and patriarchal society.

Vrinda Nabar in her article 'Caste as Woman' comments, "Mythicising her role gives her (a woman) a degree of fulfillment in life. This self-deception also perpetuates the power-equations whereby the woman/mother eventually sees her imprisonment as empowering her by conferring on her the attributes of mother and wife. She sees largely (perhaps naturally) in relation to the man in the domestic power-hierarchy (husband/sons). She thus becomes a symbol of what men later on expect their women to be –unless enlightened and rational to an almost superhuman degree, the mother jealously guards against any evidence that her power vis-à-vis her son is weakening" (185-186).

Desai puts forth her view through the tragic life of Monisha's that the psyche of the men needs a basic shift in their treatment of women. In order to live a happy and fulfilled life men also realize the certain possibilities in life.

The traditional patriarchal society anticipates its women to lead life in accordance to the norms framed for men's convenience. Women are expected to continue the social tyranny in the community oriented nature of Indian family structures. Monisha is victimized traditionally by her incapacity to become a mother. Monisha's agony is caused by the meaningless social myths which govern the male psyche in a tradition-bound society.