



# "Unveiling Anita Desai's Profound Identity: An Exploration of Her Role as an Empowered and Visionary Feminist Novelist in Contemporary Literature"

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**Abstract** - Anita Desai is a very popular Indian novelist. She is known as the Mother of the Indian psychological novel genre. Her meticulous depictions of modern Indian life have secured her a place of honor in the pantheon of Indian authors. Winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, Desai has authored as many as sixteen works of fiction. Anita Desai is one of the prominent gifted novelists in Indian English. She was born in Mussorie on 24th June 1937. Her father was a Bengali while her mother was German. She grew up with English, Hindi, Bengali and German. English was her first language. She began her writing at the age of seven it was in English. She has written novels, stories, children books and articles. She is often considered as psychological novelist and a feminist who deals with major themes of isolation, lack of communication, inner struggle, man woman relationship and marital discords. Her protagonists are female. Language and technique used by Anita Desai is as per theme and situation. She uses memories of past that is Nostalgia as a narrative technique. Her distinct style of writing, original characters, use of language, realistic theme, and narrative technique has made her writing so endearing which earned many words, recognitions and awards for her work. Her contribution to the literary world is without any doubt is great. All aspects of her writing are discussed in the paper.

**Keywords :-** Feminist, isolation, physical landscape

**INTRODUCTION** - Indian writers have been making great contribution to the literary world at national and international level. They focused on Indian culture, tradition, race, politics and self-identity. Many Indian writers have made their own place in the world literature. Today Indian writing in English has to be viewed in a global context. Indian fiction in English emerged out of almost 8 to 9 decades. Harvesting of novel has been begun in 1930s with great writers R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. They were followed by new generation novelists like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rashid, Geeta Mehta, Anita Desai, Shobha De and Arundhati Roy. They explored various subjects. All of them have earned considerable fame for their fictional contribution. Indian women novelists explored female subjectivity to establish an identity. Out of them Anita Desai is one of the prominent Indian women novelists in English. She is one of the most

popular, world famous and best novelists. She has enriched Indian fictions at large. She has held a unique place among Indian writers in English.

For centuries, women in the traditional social order and system have always been considered subservient to men. In patriarchal Bourgeois society, the maternal community has been 'lowered', 'tormented', 'silenced' and 'tortured' socially and economically. With the post-modernizing age, women began to see the macrocosm with their own eyes and not through the manly aspect. In India, with the maternal struggle against patriarchy another inner revolution started manifesting itself in literature, especially women's jottings. The voices of women began to battle with those of men. The purpose of our paper is to concentrate on the feminist communication as articulated in Anita Desai's well-reputed novels, *Cry, the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Our intent is to examine critically how in the post-ultramodern period Indian women pens in English have stressed women's questions. They've raised a fiery voice or initiated an inner revolution against the traditional customs and gender demarcation with a view to equating mortal rights. Considering the femme fatale characters of Anita Desai, one of the most famed Indian pens writing in English, especially the important and tyrannous womanish protagonists, Sita and Maya of *Cry, the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* This paper proposes to draw attention to Desai's works as exemplary cases of postmodern feminism.

The entry of Anita Desai gives the birth of an era which promises a new deal for Indian English fiction. She is foremost Indian novelists of post-independence era. She is one of the most prominent writers in Indian English. She is regarded as a writer who introduced the psychological novels in the tradition of Virginia Woolf in India. She introduced the psychological realism in her first novel '*Cry the Peacock*' in 1963. She is without doubt the most read contemporary writer in Indian English. This talented Indian Novelist was born as Anita Mujumdar on June 24th 1937 in Mussoorie, Uttarakhand. Her father is Bengali and mother is German. The positive atmosphere in home and a very creative imagination helped her to be mature in her vision. Her father was a Bengali businessman and mother was of German origin. She received her education from Queen Mary's higher secondary high school and Miranda House, Delhi University where she received her B.A. in English Literature.

Her career as a writer started with short stories which were published in magazines. Her short story *Circus Cat*, *How Gentle is the Mist?*, *Tea With the Maharani*, *Ghost House*, *Mr Bose's Private Bliss*, *Private Tuition* by Mr Bose are famous. She has written essays, articles and reviews also for many magazines and newspapers. Collection of short stories, *Games of Twilight* which contains stories named *Pineapple Cake*, *Sale*, *The Accompanist*, *A Devoted Son*, *The Farewell Party*, *Pigeons* and *At Daybreak*. She has written books for children like *Peacock Garden* (1974), *Cat On A House Boat* (1976) and *Village By the Sea* (1982).

Her stories followed by her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* in 1963. Desai has contributed to the Indian English literature by her valuable novels as *Voice in the City* (1965), *Bye-bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), *Fire On the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light Of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1989) and *Journey To Ithaca* (1995).

Anita Desai is very popular and sensitive novelist in India. Her popularity can be seen the increasing number of researchers taking up critical studies of her works in the universities in India and abroad. She is an honorary fellow at the University of Cambridge. She has been a fellow of Royal Society of Literature in London. She has been an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has been awarded numerous prizes and honors including, Padmashri and Padmabhushan from Government of India and Taraknath Das Award for promotion of Indo-US relations. She has won the Sahitya Akademi Award for

her novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) for the year 1978. Her three novels *Clear Light of the Day*, *In Custody* and *Fasting Feasting* had been nominated for the prestigious Booker Prize Award. Her novel *In Custody* was adapted by Merchant Ivory Production into English film by the same name. It was directed by Ismail Merchant, It won the 1994 president of India Gold Medal for best picture. The noted Indian film personalities Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azmi and Om Puri acted in the picture.

In her pursuit to find out the true meaning of existence, Anita Desai makes her characters her mouthpiece. They are not simply representatives or cardboard creatures. They do not simply stand for a certain society or a certain moment in history. Anita Desai's elementary concern in her novels is to explore and to expound human psyche and self. In the contemporary socio-political set up the predicament of the modern man does seem to be one of the dominant interests of the novelist.

Desai's female characters are generally neurotic and highly sensitive. They are unwilling to adjust with the reality. They live in an alienated world of dream and fantasy and stand separated from their surroundings.

She is often considered as a psychological novelist and a feminist she deals with the major themes of self – identity, isolation, inner struggle, man woman relationship marital discord, lack of communication and mental problems of women which lead them towards insecurity. The female characters are unsatisfied, unhappy, failure and frustrate .They try to escape from their cages and in the process get themselves mentally bruised. Female characters in her novels are chief protagonist. Her treatment of female characters, her feminist approach, analysis of gender sexuality and subjectivity are seen in most of her novels. In this respect her novels are different from other Indian novelists: Nayantara Sehagal, Kamala Markandaya or Ruth Jhabvala who concerned with politics east west encounters and traditions. Desai's concern is with psychic life of her characters. For this “She has been considered as a novelist of mood and psyche” (Sharma 166).

Kohli points out “No other writer is so much concerned with the life of young man and woman in Indian cities as Anita Desai.”

Her involvement with Indian woman and their reaction is different from other which distinguishes her from other Indian writers. It is explained with following examples-

Maya is a protagonist of the novel *Cry the Peacock*. She is obsessed with death and haunted by predication of astrologer that her marriage is going to end within four years with the death of either she or her husband. Finally of insanity she kills her husband and commits suicide.

Sita is a major character of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* She finds alienated for her husband and children. She remains lonely in the broken family.

In *Fire On the Mountain* Nanda escapes from house and leaves in the isolated place because of her unfaithful husband. The novel is praised for its poetic symbolism and use of sounds. It featured three female protagonists each subdued or damaged in some way.

In the novel *In Custody* ups and downs of human mind is illustrated beautifully. Desai's another novel *Voices In the City* has remarkable existential problem. It is a novel of three protagonist, Nirode, Monisha and Amla Alienation, isolation, loneliness and self identity is main concern of the novel. The novel encompasses the author's experiences in the city of Calcutta.



*Clear Light of Day* is praised for its highly evocative portrait of two sisters caught in the lassitude of Indian life. Its characters are revealed not only through imagery but through gesture, dialogue, and reflection. It is a study of Delhi that combines fiction with history to explore the lives of a middle-class Hindu family.

**Language and Technique:** - We cannot separate theme and technique from Anita Desai's novels. They are not isolated elements but inter related. In order to convey theme, she uses places, characters, situation, dialogues and silence Her use of technique and narration give her distinct position among the Indian novelist. It is vital agent of thematic trust. Her dialogues are powerful and touch the heart. She uses different techniques of narration as per theme and situation. She uses memories of past Nostalgia as a narrative technique. In this respect she is compared with James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

All readers and critics are anonymously agreed that beyond doubt Anita Desai is one of the most popular feminist Indian novelists in English. It is she who has enriched the tradition of the Indian novel in English. Anita Desai's contributions to fiction have made her special and uplift the position of Indian fiction in to desired height of world literature.

### Setting:

Desai's novels evolve a typical setting of their own. Most are set in the city. At the hearts of the novels are usually big, old houses with several verandas, green shutters, gardens, servants, and pets. The garden is extremely important in Desai's world because her characters show an unusual sensitivity to it. Trees, creepers, tendrils, flowers, fruits, seasons, pets are more vividly perceived in Desai's novels than anywhere else in Indian English fiction. The characters belong to the upper class. The city, the hill station, the big house with a garden, a decadent family, an obsession with the past—these make up the typical world of a Desai novel.

Anita Desai's work is a part of new style of writing, Anita Desai once said, 'My style of writing is to allow the story to unfold on its own. I try not to structure my work too rigidly'. Her distinct style of writing, her original characters and her realistic subject-line is what made her writings so endearing. Desai's descriptive skill is widely acclaimed by critics. Her novels are quite short. Her use of image and symbol is sophisticated. Her writing style is praised for its poetic symbolism and use of sounds. Desai's novels demonstrate her constant experimentation and progressive maturation as a writer.

### Conclusion:

Most of her plots deal with her personal experience of life. She never patronized a single theme or message. She believed in citing the truth as it is. Her sensitive portrayal of the inner feelings of her female characters is excellent. Many of Anita Desai's novels explore tensions between family members and the alienation of middle-class women. In her books, Anita has managed to deal with topics ranging from anti-Semitism to western quintessential ideologies of India and the death of Indian traditions and customs. Desai's works deal with contemporary Indian life, culture clashes between the East and the West, generational differences, and practical and emotional exile.

Thus Anita Desai is a great novelist. She is popular in the entire world. She has made a solid path for the coming generations.

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