

Self and Society in Anita Desai's Novels

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Received: May 14, 2023 Accepted: June 21, 2023 Online Published: July 11, 2023

doi:10.5430/wjel.v13n7p140

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v13n7p140>

Abstract

The objective of this study mainly focuses on Anita Desai's Protagonists and how far they are different from society and their self. Anita Desai's basic parameters of exploration attempted to emphasise the similarities and differences between different characters' predicaments. Her fictions starkly emphasise how little people know about many important aspects of themselves and their universe. It offers a sensitive and penetrating study of the complex mental activity that influences human thought and behaviour. The narrative strategies employed by her reveal both her creative instincts and the critical distancing that imparts an ironical aspect to her presentation. Her writing exposes to us the tormented thoughts and perplexed actions of her characters, who are sensitive normal people. At the same time, by showing at least a few of her protagonists as achieving her faith in the human ability to critically examine and reorient faith.

Keywords: Self, Alienation, Loneliness, Self-fulfilment and Inner-restlessness

1. Introduction

We confront the inquisitive sensibility of her compassionate characters in all of her novels and observe their efforts to come up with a logical explanation for why they are here. The pursuit of self-fulfillment is the universal quest shared by all thinking people in a world where everything is in flux and the possibilities of finding happiness depend on the individual's deliberate effort and assertion. It also unifies the various characters in her countless works. The psychological and philosophical undertones of her protagonists' quests add to the novelist's presentation's richness and complexity.

The thematic and formalistic analysis of her fiction in terms of a developing and expanding vision as manifested in her novels is an attempt at the explication of a very humanistic and practical attitude to countering and, if possible, overcoming the existential dilemmas of life. The intention is to trace the development of specific thematic patterns and to identify the narrative strategies employed by the novelist in disseminating her philosophical vision.

Anita Desai, who is considered to be a member of the second generation of Indian writers of English, has a close connection to the introspective, psychological novel and a metaphysical investigation into the existential conundrum of humans. She reflects a new focus and orientation of Indian English writing, which switched away in the 1960s from defining outside reality to the equally potent interior reality, along with other contemporary authors like Arun Joshi, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Bharati Mukherjee, and others.

According to Malcolm Bradbury, the modern novelists in the West had lost the earlier novelists, "confidence in reality, in progressive sequences, in the natural growth of the relationship between individuals and their moral and social progress" (p.2). Consequently, the novel turned inward to examine "the flow of individuals and collective consciousness, with its altered structure of relationship, its changed temporality" (p.3), while externally there was an increased propensity towards consideration of form, fictionality and reflexive self-examination. It cannot be denied that the Indian-English novel is considerably influenced by the developments in the Western novel in terms of both themes and technique. Following the new focus of writing, which is "an attempt at adjustment between literature and a certain state of transition in civilization and culture", Indian writers too reflected the changes wrought by a transitional social order in their inward turn into the psychological realm of individuals struggling to adjust to new demands and pressures. In the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee, these writers "were less concerned with the larger social world than a strict fidelity to the individual vision of their central characters" (p.5). Their characters are not engaged in matters of survival in purely economic terms but try to cope with the very assault of existence itself.

Anita Desai's fiction reflects the turmoil of modern existence with its divergent demands and pressures by delineating the crisis of human personality and human relationships. This is confined within the parameters of home and family in her earlier novels and because her range of focus is limited to the middle-class urban sensibility, her fiction has been seen to occupy a limited space in terms of characters and situations. As a critic asserts, "Her novels and short stories are fairly insulated from a blatant adulterous relationship, planned brutal killings or incendiary demonstrations..... The explosions in Mrs Desai's novels only occur within narrow domestic walls" (p.6). But this orientation is a matter of personal preference and interest and is related to Anita Desai's interest in exploring the submerged layers of the hidden mind which contribute actively to her characters' predicaments. As she clarified in an interview. "Every writer chooses the sort of characters that interest him or her, that he/she knows well and can write about with authenticity and feeling" (p.7). Vijayalakshmi Seshadri, who has analysed her fiction as a statement of female autonomy, links this new orientation to the emergence of a 'class-oriented fiction'

which addresses the predominantly rural milieu of writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya, etc. Thus, Anita Desai's fictional world reflects a small but strongly delineated space within which her strongly individualistic characters attempt to come to terms with their existence.

Anita Desai's fictional approach traverses the complex depths of human experience, reflecting its varied nuances in minute detail. The boredom and suffocation, the self-centred existence, the intellectual pretensions and the limited capabilities behind respectable facades of civilised life, all come under the scope of her artistic vision. Her sensibility and that of her fictional world located primarily among the educated, urban class, owes considerably to the twin influences of an Indian way of life and Western influences imbibed through an awareness of Western literature, philosophy and cultural ethos. Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, Saul Bellow, Dostoevsky, Kawabata, etc., have been acknowledged sources of illumination and inspiration for her and have undoubtedly influenced her vision and technique. Through this technique the writer could indicate the precise nature of the character's present experience and also elaborate on his life before the given moment, thus achieving a spatial and temporal expansion.

Though she stresses the psychological nature of her characters' predicaments, they are situated against concrete socio-political contexts which are integrally related to their tensions. Her forte is the exploration of sensibility—"the particular kind of Indian sensibility that is ill at ease among barbarians and the philistines the anarchists and the moralists"(p.9). The focuses of her interest are those individuals who are situated at the crossroads of multiple influences and seek a rationale of existence that can order their disparate experiences into a coherent whole. The internal turmoil and restlessness of her questing individuals compensate for the limited external action in most of her novels, especially the earlier novels. She follows her vision in formulating her characters' attitudinal predicaments. It would be incorrect to categorise her only as a novelist dealing with the psychic states of her characters because these mental dilemmas are caused by the awareness of certain social obligations and The conflict between her protagonists' inner and outside worlds occupies fascinates the novelist. The conflict between her protagonists' inner and outside worlds occupies fascinates the novelist.

Self-fulfilment is a strong motivating force in Anita Desai's characters who can be seen at one level to reflect the universal quest for an ideal existence. They have their theories of life, and with great sensitivity and insight, the novelist conveys them to us, with all their inconsistencies, fallacies, limitations, intuitive visionary flashes and concluding premises. A theory may be considered as a way of binding together a large collection of facts so that they may be comprehended more quickly and easily, and it is an inbuilt human conceptual strategy. The positive aspects of a body of work that is often sombre and severe come from their rebellion and compromise, abandoning deeply felt but false reasoning in favour of new ways of living, and accepting disillusionment and disenchantment as necessary companions to living. Anita Desai's fiction thus foregrounds both her characters' limitation as well as their ability, through their attempts, to overcome this debilitating encounter with the reality of life.

The self, as the centre of the empirical experiences, is crucially involved in this search and fulfilment. Conceiving her characters as the pressurised inhabitants of the modern world, aware of their identity and aspirations, confused about the direction life has taken or apathetic to it, resigned to their fates or rebelling against it, through their dilemmas Anita Desai reveals the paradoxes which govern life. Her philosophical argument centres on the idea that humans are imprisoned in their minds for several reasons, including imperfect self- and world-knowledge as well as unhelpful early experiences and naturalistic training. With their fragmented personalities and shattered psyches, her characters seek the best means of surviving in these rational times which have shorn life of all sustaining illusions and myths and have reduced man to leading mechanical lives. Existential despair seems a constant companion of these characters, acutely sensitive as they are. However, they become significant in their very awareness of the limiting propensities of human existence and in their desire to give meaning to life on their terms. Whether it is Billy Biswas in Arun Joshi's "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas" or Saru in Shashi Deshpande's "The Night Holds No Terrors" Hari in Anita Desai's "Village by the Sea", survival is linked to a recognition of their true selves and to finding their bearings in a chaotic world where powerful flux threatens the permanence of any achievement. Anita Desai makes us aware of, and validates, the psychic conflicts which lie beneath the surface of all individual lives, whatever their place in life, and gives dignity to the anguished perceptions, fears and anxieties of characters who are ordinary human beings, distinguished only by their extraordinary sensibility.

The individual is of paramount importance in Anita Desai's world-view and the individual consciousness her chosen tool of exposition. The "thought, emotion and sensation" of her characters contribute to the sombre picture of the world as visualised by her. Her fiction is peopled with anguished individuals who are locked within stifling prisons of self-created and societal expectations and have become alienated not only from others around them but even themselves. They consciously or subconsciously seek fulfilment through the attainment of their emotional, intellectual and spiritual desires but are incapable of a realistic assessment of their situation.

In various articles and interviews, she has articulated her perception of the introspective and traumatized individual and his attempts to redefine his position vis-à-vis the external environment. For her, the greatest dilemma faced by her as a creative artist is to show her characters simultaneously having their existence in society and yet managing to retain their individuality because she felt that exile from society could not solve any individual's problem. Her emphasis is on the desperately seeking and rationalising sensibility of her anxiety-laden, individualistic characters but this is counterpointed by an oblique awareness of the negative aspect of so much individuation that prevents these characters but this is counterpointed by an oblique awareness of the negative aspect of so much individuation that prevents these characters from achieving a balanced perspective.

Anita Desai's protagonists attempt to eliminate pressure from their lives by taking recourse to certain strategies, but as the novelist's

presentation obliquely suggests, pressure has to be recognised as a part of everyday life. The challenge is how to deal with it. Honest self-assessment is a prime requisite for Anita Desai's characters in their search for self-fulfilment. It comprises for the writer the only possible means of living meaningful lives. Only those characters who are capable of reorientation of their life-supporting theories. Those who remain unwilling or incapable of appreciating the multitudinous aspects of life remain incapable of modifying the instinctual and intellectual apprehension of their world and are doomed to restlessness and frustration.

The writer emphasises the sensitive and even over-sensitive consciousness of characters who are deeply unhappy but confused about the origins of this unhappiness, unsure about their future actions but keen to be rid of this anguished awareness by seeing some meaningful patterns in life that can resolve their dilemmas. Unconsciously seeking deliverance through some external agency, they ultimately realise the necessity of their initiative in overcoming their dilemmas.

Through her continuous and discontinuous modes of narration Anita Desai's fiction dismantles the doctrines of the unified self, objective reality as well as that of the closed text. She delivers a discontinuous narrative and demonstrates tremendous expertise in developing specific ideas before flipping them to offer fresh perspectives on a particular circumstance. Her writing combines both omniscient modes of narration and linear development of the story as well as using experimental modes of narration. But on the whole, she seems to subscribe to Virginia Woolf's opinion that there is more than one method of writing to express her thoughts artistically and convincingly.

Anita Desai, projecting existence as a multi-hued phenomenon, is concerned with her protagonists' imprisonment within uni-dimensional understanding and perspectives that seek to constrict the actuality of the multiple reality, and she envisages a pluralistic approach to comprehending the fragmented aspects of experience. Her earlier novels seem to indicate a linear working out of certain attitudinal positions reflected in the progression from Maya's neurotic consciousness in "Cry, the Peacock". Through Monisha's frenzied awareness of her self-deluding understanding of life in "Voices in the City", to Sita's reluctant acceptance of her irrevocable association with her family and responsibility in "Where Shall we go This Summer?". The initial encounter led one to interpret her writing in terms of a vision that changed over time from a dismal assessment of humanity's situation to a more optimistic engagement with the outside world. However, the sudden deaths of Nanda Kaul and Ila Das in "Fire on the Mountain" and of Baumgartner in "Baumgartner's Bombay" assert the unfeasibility of any such progression in human affairs, which remain subject to the inscrutable laws governing them. This changing emphasis in her fictional output is thus symbolic of the writer's preoccupation with delineating the unpredictability of life.

Anita Desai aims to bring to the surface the hidden dynamics of the inner self because it closely affects the overt behaviour of the individual. However, despite her assertion to the contrary, of being interested in the portrayal of rebellion and failure, her humanistic presentation is concerned not only with the failures of her characters but with the concrete task of enabling them to meaningfully bridge the gap between their inner and outer selves. In an interview with Jasbir Jain, she talked of the need for a 'unifying idea' in the context of the creative process.

This is equally relevant to her characters' predicament because their fragmented psyches seek a link between their inner and outer realities to harmonise their disparate experiences into a unified whole. This wholeness of being and existence is consciously and unconsciously sought by her characters and the nature of this ideal's attainment forms the text of Anita Desai's narratives.

My thematic and formalistic exposition of her novels is geared towards tracing her protagonists' quest in terms of two overriding themes that form a leitmotif throughout her multi-layered fiction. Marital incompatibility, suppressed violence, and the problem of communication between illusion and reality, between instinct and intellect constitute some important concerns of the writer and are delineated with varying emphases in her different novels. Her characters search for different ways to approximate their ideal of self-fulfilment, and in this search, they inevitably adopt the ideal of self-fulfilment. and in this search, they inevitably adopt a particular approach according to their temperaments and understanding of life. These can be polarised as attitudes of attachment or detachment, of acceptance or rejection of the multiple aspects of the world around them. The inherent tension between the ideals of attachment or rejection of the multiple aspects of the world around them. The inherent tension between the ideals of attachment and detachment is particularly noticeable in the earlier novels of Anita Desai and becomes a viable frame of reference for the analysis.

Most of her Main characters deal with affecting their quality of life. Her novels probe the issue from different angles and they may be seen as an extended argument discussing the problem of retreat and detachment versus acceptance and involvement. This preoccupation of the writer points to a deep interest in religion and philosophy, which she admitted, "It belonged to a certain time of my life, and it is there in my earlier books, but eventually I discarded it." Her later novels reflect other concerns, but in her latest novel, "Journey to Ithaca, this preoccupation, in the form of a narrative dealing with renunciation, with the claims of sacred and profane love, resurfaces again, thus pointing to its continued significance for the writer.

It is a fact that her characters' dilemma of wanting to lead a self-fulfilling life reflects a universal concern, yet their Indian sensibility provides a particularity and authenticity to their situation. Anita Desai, through her creative process, has synthesised her vision with material drawn from the mythical heritage of her race. Anita Desai has the benefits of a dual perspective since through her German mother she had access to the cultural ramifications of that country also. But the strength of her fiction lies in delineating characters pervasively influenced by their cultural values, and it becomes an effective vehicle for conveying both the positive and negative aspects of this cultural conditioning. In the post-colonial context, faithfulness to one's cultural and traditional heritage is essential for the preservation and reinforcement of identity.

This aspect of her fiction has not been commented upon, though different critics have discussed various aspects of her work like her character's use of survival strategies, the retreat into fantasy by psychologically traumatised individuals, the interpersonal relations between

different characters, etc. her works have also been viewed as strong feminist statements. Her works have also been viewed as strong feminist statements. Professor Malashri Lal in her study titled "Law of Threshold- Women Writers in Indian English" has made an interesting study of the Indian women, caught between the claims of individual desires and family commitments. She has discussed some of Anita Desai's novels in this light.

Anita Desai's usage of typically Indian associations like attachment and detachment, the Maya- Gautam or Raman- Sita conflict, the idea of destiny and fatalism, the guru- shishya tradition, the Radha-Krishna association, the concept of the four ashrams of life, the ideal of renunciation, helps her to create a particular type of ambience in her novels. The conflict between attachment and detachment has no specifically religious overtones but becomes relevant as a culturally significant framework for analysis and substantiating her particular vision. Her artistic sensibility has utilised these associations ironically so that they may be re-evaluated and seen from a fresh perspective. The theme of attachment and detachment in her novels is not treated at an abstract level but becomes integrally associated with the protagonists' attempts to find happiness in their lives. Your goal is to simulate the usual appearance of papers in a journal of the Academy Publication. We are requesting that you follow these guidelines as closely as possible.

2. Characters' Search for Identity

The second motif is to discuss the characters' search for identity and their desire to assert their identity, an issue integrally related to the unhappy individuals' quests for self-fulfilment. Happiness for her characters is related to their ability to experience the wholeness of experience, both in terms of the varied experiences offered by the world. But this achievement is only possible for them if they understand themselves properly. Only a true understanding of themselves, with their strength and weakness, can allow these characters a chance at happiness. The self is the key to self-fulfilment and, as revealed by the author, unless the self is multidimensional, it cannot respond to the multiple claims on it made in my life. The question of identity has been explored in a variety of ways in literature, ranging from its metaphysical and philosophical aspects to the social aspect.

3. Individual Identity

The issue of feminism, the question of individual identity has different ramifications in the Indian context. Critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee feel that an abstract ideal like searching for an individual identity or personal happiness is alien to the Indian cultural ethos. She says, "The fulfilment of oneself, however desirable a goal according to the individualistic ideals of Western society, has always been alien to the Indian tradition, especially when it is achieved at the cost of duty to the family"(p.20). On the contrary, Usha Pathania is of the view that individualistic ideas are an inevitable reflection of the "changed temperament of the age when a distinctly individual identity is the cherished dream of every individual"(p.21).

She records the subtle cultural and intellectual changes which are responsible for the breakdown in the traditional familial structures, for a shift in emphasis from a collective destiny to an individual fate, causing immense psychological upheaval and necessitating psychological reorientation in coping with new internal demands. Anita Desai's characters face the tension of opposing traditionally reinforced social roles in urban society through an assertion of the individual will, and this conflict takes its toll on their fragmented psyches. They need a healthy sense of self to be fragmented psyches. They need a healthy sense of self to be able to cope with these pressures.

4. Post-colonial World

In the post-colonial world, the question of identity has become foregrounded with the new amalgamations and assimilations that have inevitably taken place and refuted the traditionally upheld idea of a unified, single self. Postcolonial writing emerging from Africa, the Caribbean, South American, Australian, Canadian and Indian worlds testifies to the search for roots and the emergence of a composite identity and defines anew the whole idea of identity. This new entity requires a new social, psychological and philosophical orientation as well as a new language to do it justice.

In order to combat the feeling of loss and fragmentation, identity is established as more than only personal, communal, social, national, and racial terms. Om P. Juneja, in his comprehensive study of the post-colonial literary sense, documents the need for 'race retrieval', for appropriating perspectives to facilitate the process in which identity" may be created and recuperated"(p.22).

Globally too, the issue of identity assumes significance in the rapidly changing ideological, political and social scenarios, where national boundaries have blurred and political and racial aggression have become part of life, leading to a sense of insecurity and instability. Gender studies, linguistic and structural analyses, psychosexual applications, and archetypal and historical perspectives have also provided varied referential frameworks for probing the issue of identity. In the context of Indian English writing, the concern with individual identity and its aspirations has come cent restage are a negative aspect of a rapidly changing scenario where the individual has assumed more importance than the social or community aspects. This leads to both his alienation as well and his increased dependence on himself to take positive charge of his world.

5. Inner Restlessness in Anita Desai's Fiction

The search for identity is presented in Anita Desai's fiction implicitly, not as a conscious, intellectual quest of the individuals but as an inner restlessness and occasional rebellion against traditionally reinforced roles, especially in the case of women. In her later novels like "Village by the Sea"(1982) "In Custody"(1984), and "Baumgartner's Bombay"(1988), this issue is probed in diverse ways. "Bye-Bye Black Bird" (1971), though published earlier, also becomes relevant for discussion in this context since it deals with the immigrant situation. She has used the framework of the East-West encounter to consider the tension generated by the clash between two cultures, but her presentation

rises above the obvious level of confrontation to consider the individual adjustment to idealised expectation and disillusionment.

“Journey to Ithaca”(1995) also provides scope for discussing this issue further, though this latest novel adds a spiritual dimension to the quests of its protagonists. These various themes can be seen to run through her entire body of fiction, only the emphasis varies according to the conception of the artist. It is impossible to reduce any novel to a single defining framework because her novels operate within different levels of meaning. Examine her novels to elicit her psychological-philosophical approach to solving the existential dilemmas of life.

6. Alienation and Loneliness as Recurrent Themes in Anita Desai's Fiction

Anita Desai handled alienation and loneliness are the recurrent themes in her fiction but she presented them in their philosophical dimensions, yet acceptance of life's dilemmas and contradictions in all its multitudinous hues, and finding one's place in the family, and the community in large seems to offer to her protagonists the only mature way of finding whatever peace and happiness are possible. She is concerned with the problems of actual living rather than any deeply religious or spiritual issues. Anita Desai's protagonists seek self-fulfilment without understanding their real selves or the nature of social demands that inevitably pressurise them and create tension.

Perception plays a key role in Anita Desai's novels in both constituting the dilemma of her protagonists and affording them a release from them. It becomes the organising factor of a particular personality and an integrating factor with the external world. The importance of perception has been acknowledged by both psychological and philosophical theories as a medium of understanding the world. The modern period rejects the concept of absolute reality because it challenges all conventional beliefs and behaviours and emphasises each person's interacting relationship with the outside environment. A multiplicity of frames encloses human experience and perception, and any single approach can only set restrictive boundaries. Reacting against the scientific rational tradition enshrined by the Enlightenment, modern philosophers and writers questioned surface reality in search of a more profound reality submerged in the human psyche.

As Anita Desai's narrative reveal, all her characters have a theory of life by their exposure and experience and they live their life according to this understanding, whether it is mature or immature, objective or subjective. These various perspectives are relevant for analysing Anita Desai's fiction. Constant revision and modification of one's ideas is the only key to survival. An important aspect permeating her works is the inevitability of disillusionment and disenchantment that is built into the very fabric of existence. Her characters are ordinary individuals who associate self-fulfilment with their achievement of consciously or subconsciously sought goals. However, in life's unpredictable progression, there is a vast gap between the ideal and reality and how the individuals reconcile themselves or accept and reject this fact is a focal point for the novelist. Only a multiple, evolutionary vision as expressed by personal construct theory can accommodate all the varied experiences of life.

7. Conclusion

Self-fulfilment is an ideal sought by all but its attainment has a relative significance. The synthesis and equilibrium attained by a few of Anita Desai's characters raise interesting questions both about the feasibility of attaining this ideal and its relative value. The cycle of desire and achievement is an unending one.

Self-fulfilment may be only the replacement of one illusory mental construct by another. But as revealed by Anita Desai, the new perceptions gained by individuals through introspection are positively geared and help to integrate individuals with their world. Adaptation, not renunciation is the key to her vision. This vision can be inferred through her shifting, multiple perspectives which probe deeper and deeper into the causes of human suffering. The open endings of her narratives convey the unending patterns of achievement and desire. What is interesting is that on one hand her exploratory fiction raises many existential questions, which is her avowed aim, and on the other, her fiction tentatively expounds a philosophical resolution of these problems. Just as the perfect novel achieves the perfect balance as essentially related to helping individuals chart their course through life.

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