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Existential Anguish and Alienation in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai

Piyush Ranjan

Corresponding Author: Piyush Ranjan, Research Scholar, Department of English, Patliputra University, Patna, piyushr06@gmail.com

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Abstract

This research paper examines the theme of alienation in the selected novels of Anita Desai, highlighting her profound psychological insight into loneliness, emotional suffering, identity crisis, and social isolation. Her characters struggle to balance personal aspirations with societal expectations while remaining trapped between tradition and modernity. Through symbolism, vivid imagery, and the stream-of-consciousness technique, Desai portrays emotional neglect, cultural displacement, and existential anxiety with remarkable depth. The study adopts a qualitative textual approach, employing close reading of selected primary texts supported by relevant secondary critical sources. Psychological and existential perspectives are used to analyze the complex emotional and social realities reflected in her fiction. The paper argues that alienation in Desai's novels is not merely personal but also psychological, social, cultural, and existential. By combining innovative narrative techniques with deep psychological realism, Anita Desai transforms individual suffering into a universal reflection on the modern human condition, establishing herself as one of the foremost voices in Indian English literature.

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Over the last few decades Indian English literature has transformed from colonial narratives to identity exploration in which several writers have their contributions into this transformation. Anita Desai is one of the popular figures of Indian writings in English, well known for her psychological, social and sensitive representations of human lives. Her novels are more concerned with individual's life rather than social fabrics. Born to a German mother and Bengali father, Anita Desai has experienced her life in a multilingual environment by which she developed the Indian sensibility along with the Western literary techniques. Her notable works include- *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the city* (1965), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear light of Day* (1980), *The village by the sea* (1982), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) and several others.

Focusing on inner consciousness rather than outer events, her novels deal with the recurring themes of alienation and isolation in which the characters feel very lonely and isolated from the society with an experience of deep emotional vacuum. Desai's female protagonists undergo through a deep emotional suffocation and are portrayed struggling against the male dominating social norms in search for their own identity. Her characters most often deal with the identity questions searching about the meaning, identity and purpose for life. Not only the individuals but family also plays a dynamic role through her novels with the revelation of tensions, conflicts, social and emotional complexities. Arya Ghosh writes about Anita Desai's novels, "they are torn [...] her novels chart a peculiar path of circularity where texts only begin and rebegin, and "end" by coming back to the point of beginning once more" (256).

While employing the technique of stream of consciousness and several imageries she reflects the thoughts and emotional state of her characters. With the use of psychological depth and character's personal experience she not only revolutionized India fiction but also brought Indian English literature a step further towards international recognitions. With the fine use of imageries in her writings she moulds her character's sensitive, especially female characters. Several critics praised her writing for her literary style and emotional depth whereas many highlighted towards her lack of strong plot structure. Above all she always remains as a prominent literary figure whose works influence a wider space of readers and critics throughout the world.

The theme of alienation is the most striking theme reflecting fragmentation, anxiety and isolation in Anita Desai's novels along with her deep insights and focus on characters' psychology and inner lives. These stories are not only the narrative events but an exploration of deep emotions and psychological journey where an individual feels isolated from society, family and even own self. The novel, *Cry, the peacock*, is a wonderful and true representation of alienation and mental instability. The protagonist of the story, Maya, is deeply emotional, imaginative and hypersensitive. Her feelings of alienation fly its wings mainly because of her inability to attach with her husband, Gautama, "My thoughts are like birds beating against the bars of the cage" (10).

Gautama is fully engrossed in his intellectual search for calmness and remains detached from Maya's physical, psychological, and emotional needs. Here, Gautama represents rationality, detachment, and philosophical calmness. While standing in the moonlight near Gautama, Maya thinks, "... Nothing was hidden. All was revealed, and it was not what I hunted for. He was not on my side at all, but across a river, across a mountain, and would always remain so" (131). This results in a gap between them. On one side, Maya's longing for love, affection, and emotional attachment is neglected by Gautama's cold and detached nature, leaving her isolated. "Maya rejoices and is highly sensitive to the 'vivid, explosive, mobile life,' 'the world of sounds, senses, movements, odours, tunes'" (92).

The burden of existence is the chief characteristics of most of her characters. The novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* can also be said to be the closest novel to Anita Desai's personal experience as an immigrant. Maya's childhood was spent in an environment of excessive love and protection that made her dependent and fragile. Her feeling of alienation was much intensified by her childhood experience. The prophecy was made by an astrologer that her marriage will not be a successful one. The prophecy that either she or her husband would die within four years of their marriage always haunts her. This feeling of fear not only isolates her from the real world but also pushes her into the world of anxiety and obsession. Desai through her rich variety of imageries and symbolisms depicted Maya's feelings of loneliness, pain and her unfulfilled desire. The psychological breakdown and her alienation were so intense that she fears with external reality

resulting her inability to face the failure. According to Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai's books are "as solitary, as separate as their characters" (71).

Thus, in the novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, the theme of alienation is personal, internal and as well as psychological. It arises from the emotional negligence and fear and fails to fill the gap between Maya's inner world and external reality resulting into a tragic act. The novel's protagonist Nanda Kaul performs her social roles as a wife and mother. She has a sense of disillusion as her husband's infidelity has unfulfilled her domestic life. After her husband's death she had been to Carignano, a secluded house in Kasauli to retreat peace and solitude. She desires of a life that is free from any responsibilities and human interventions. For her, isolation is deliberate and controlled that is meant for escape from the burdens of her past life. Her isolation seems peaceful though it is superficial. Raka, her greatgranddaughter disrupts her solitude. Raka enjoys the wilderness of human company and she mirrors Nanda Kaul's alienation mode instinctively.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, the adults play no role of an ideal parent. When Raka is sent to her great-grandmother in the mountains to recover from illness, Nanda feels very upset because she wanted to live alone. Raka attempts to escape family control as she doesn't find affection. Raka watches a party at the club and experiences trauma, "the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept" (71).

Another character, Ila Das, representing social vulnerability and helplessness exposes the harsh realities whose tragic death destroys Nanda Kaul's isolation. Her death reminds us that one cannot escape the harsh sufferings of this real world. "There was no one she wanted, nothing she desired anymore" (*Fire on the Mountain*, p. 3). The natural setting of Kasauli - the barren hills of landscape symbolize the emptiness within Nanda Kaul's personal life. Nanda in the novel *Fire on the Mountain* reveals her need for a masculine man by telling Raka the stories of her childhood. She finds security in memory of her father. She tells the story of bringing animals from foreign countries, "he would feed them himself. They loved fish. We used to catch fish in the stream for them, but we never dared feed them ourselves- they had such sudden, vicious claws. But Raka seemed not to enjoy the picture of the caged animals devouring the fish" (96).

Thus, the novel is a strong representation of her inner suppressed emotions and isolation within humans. Nanda Kaul is a staunch example of withdrawal from society which leads to disillusionment. Here isolation is not only liberation rather than works as a defense mechanism against her pain and sorrow. The context of migration and cultural displacement in which the Indian immigrants' struggle to adopt and adjust in a foreign environment is dealt and explored extensively in the novel. Adit Sen and Dev, the two chief characters in the novel are representing two contradictory responses to alienation. Initially Adit tries to assimilate and embrace the Western culture and admires modernity of the English society, but later he felt fragmented, rootless and displaced as he realised that he was not accepted into this Western society. Here on the other hand, Dev has a critical attitude towards the Western culture and is deeply reclined to his original Indian identity. His feeling of racial discrimination and social exclusion is directly a reflection of alienation. In London, Dev lives in the same house that earlier belonged to Adit which symbolizes Indian's fascination for London. He further says, "Make my bed and light the light / I arrive late tonight, / Black bird, bye-bye" (230).

The other character of the novel Sara, who is Adit's English wife is fully unaware of the Indian culture and feels disconnected to it. The sense of "otherness" is a constant theme that occurs in the novel along with the psychological impact of the racial and cultural differences. "Adit feels disgusted and could not tolerate to see "one more pale, expressionless British face. If one were to approach him he would hit it, hit it" (119). These characters are neither accepted in England nor in India, thus creates a sense of deep identity crisis. This made Adit decides to return back to his homeland India. "They were all strangers here, in a land that promised everything and gave nothing" (*Bye-Bye Blackbird*, 138). Hence, the novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* symbolizes departure, loss and a sense of belonging which the characters don't find in the abroad.

The novel *Voices in the City* highlights the inner lives of the characters against the Indian backdrop in Calcutta along with their inner and psychological turmoil. The characters like Nirode, Monisha and Amla have to face loneliness and struggle for their identity in a crowded urban city mentioned above where they feel themselves disconnected. Each character mentioned above search and

struggle for their identity and purpose. Nirode searches for the artistic meaning of life, Monisha struggles for her personal freedom, whereas Amla looks for independence and feels herself trapped in a conservative society. The novel is set in the backdrop of the conflict between the Indian values and the modern urban life. Monisha's marital life and family expectations become heavy upon her because of social norms. These characters suffer from deep psychological distress causing depression and frustrations along with highlighting their frustrated and alienated state of mind. The setting of the story itself reflects chaos and that is full of noisy, overwhelming and oppressive representing inner conflicts of the characters. Another major theme in the novel is the clash between traditional values and modern principles. The character Monisha is restricted in a conservative family where her individuality and freedom are limited. Her existence is well expressed, through the lines that says, "the wall closed in on her, tighter each day" (180).

Anita Desai's debut novel *Cry, the peacock* published in 1963 is a first person narrative chiefly concerned on women. The novel gives voice to the voiceless, and is full of anxiety and sorrow of a hypersensitive woman Maya. The death of the pet dog Totto is a reflection of emotional disconnectedness between Maya and her husband Gautama. For Maya it was an unbearable tragedy but on the other hand for Gautama it was just a trivial day-to-day incidents of everyday life. Maya's pampered and motherless childhood spent in the care of a wealthy father made her unfit to bear and face the tensions and anxieties of normal day and the *Cry, the Peacock* is the poignant presentation of neurosis resulting from fissures generated by emotional and intellectual alienation between partners. Anita Desai evokes the right atmosphere through the rich imagery, a fine tool of her style with the apt use of symbols. The psychological turmoil in Maya's life attains the dimensions of existential agony because it is rooted in the essential loneliness that corrodes her being and makes it impossible for her to find meaning in an arid existence. "Marital discord contributes to the existential agony of an essentially lonely being" (139). *A Companion to Indian Fiction in English* remarks on Desai's subject of alienation and writes:

Alienation at different levels forms the theme of Anita Desai's third novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971). The plight of the Indian immigrant domiciled in

England is depicted in which all its attendant emotional problems. The nostalgic longing of the colonized for his 'second home' gives way to disillusionment and frustration at the racial prejudice, indifference, contempt and outright hostility of the British for the Asian immigrants. The Indian is reduced to the clan of 'wogs' and English doors and windows are tightly closed against him (140).

Throughout her novels her characters reflect the complexities of modern society along with the individual's struggle for a meaningful life. On the otherhand Amla represents modern sensibility seeking independence and personal choice. Amla avoids traditional conflicts and faces uncertainties in her life. This highlights the dual nature of independence that is choice and insecurity. Through these characters, Anita Desai has tried to present that neither tradition nor modernity offers a solution for the fulfillment of the choices of these characters and are caught in deep conflict, depression and isolation. Anita Desai reflects deep psychological insights of her characters. Monisha's mental suffering is very intense as she is unable to express herself and hence leads to silence, "silence was her only escape"(p.159). Overall, Anita Desai very successfully painted the human psyche and presented before us a lesson that the greatest struggle and conflict are often internal hence cannot be resolved easily.

Although, all the selected novels have different context and settings, yet the theme of alienation is found in Anita Desai's every novel. In *Cry, the Peacock*, the theme of alienation is deeply rooted in psychological, emotional imbalance and a lack of proper communication, whereas in *Fire on the Mountain*, the theme of existential crisis along with disillusionment and withdrawal from society and reality is highlighted. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Dev realizes that as an Indian immigrant he rushed to the West but missing his homeland. He feels suffocated and thinks of himself, "like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth at a prison" (57).

It can be said that Desai's characters are not able of justify and establish a meaningful connection, thus leads to alienation, suffering and fragmentation leading ultimately to a tragic end of these stories. Maya's psychological upheaval, Nanda Kaul's complete solitude and the cultural displacement of Adit and Dev reflect the different aspects of alienation, where these characters failed to overcome their sufferings. This leads these characters' trapped into grief and

loneliness and are failed to find a purpose in their lives. Kalpana S. Wandrekar writes on Dev's alienation that, "Dev's experience in England makes him neurotic because he is unable to attach meaning to his experience. He is aware of this state of chaos and confusion in him caused by the outside pressure" (152).

Thus, it can be concluded that alienation, belongingness and loneliness are the inevitable parts of human life in this fragmented world which is full of chaos and conflict. Anita Desai's novels have tried to look into the sensitive human condition and into its dangers of isolation leading inability to communicate and empathize. These novels not only narrate the events but also explore the psychology of the individuals who feel disconnected not only from society and relationships but within themselves also:

With more than ten novels and two short story collections to her credit, Anita Desai is today the most well-known among Indian women novelists in English. Twice she was short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize. The range and sweep of her fictional oeuvre is remarkable. In the poetic and extremely sensitive use of English, in the evocation of images that transcribe the human condition and in the poignant fictionalisation of human predicament, Anita Desai's skill is incomparable" (135-136)

The modern sensibilities of the average middleclass Indian has the experiences of loneliness, rootlessness and exploitation in Anita Desai's novels. About her own upbringing she remarks that, "I confess I am afraid of speaking out about the art of writing, the mechanics of my craft. I have an intuitive and deep fear that at by speaking of something subterranean and subconscious, I will destroy it-it is something so very frail" (46). Hence, it can be said that Anita Desai has presented the sufferings, isolation, exile, suffocation through these characters who are the uprooted individuals. These characters are the representations of the emotional and psychological absence in relation to society. These themes are intricately woven and also reflect a deep human condition which contemplates our own lives in order to illuminate the depth of mankind.

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Piyush Ranjan

Piyush Ranjan is a research scholar at Patliputra university, Patna, department of English under the supervision of Prof. Ashok Kumar. He has a consistent good academic records and secured first division in post-graduation from the University of Allahabad, Prayagraj. He has qualified UGC NET in 2023. He has published several research papers in reputed academic journals and also presented research papers in national and international conferences. The quality of his research reflects his academic excellence. Apart from it he is also a poet and bibliophile at heart.

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