

Theme of Unhappy Childhood in the Novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract: Anita Desai, an Indian novel writer perceives individuals entangled in the messes and complexities of life. Through her novels, she teaches her characters the harsh realities of life and conveys them the truth of her experience. She is the most versatile and appealing novelist of Indo-Anglian literature. Other novelists of her time describe the social, political and economical conditions of their characters, but Anita Desai portrayed mental and psychological conditions of her characters. She revealed the inner conflicts and predicaments of her characters. Identity crisis, women predicaments, marital disharmony and unhappy childhood are the main themes of her novels. This article is an attempt to discuss the frustrated and unhappy childhood in the novels of Anita Desai.

Key Words: Disharmony, Predicaments, Psyche, Disillusionment, Disappointment and Recollection

I. Introduction

Mrs. Anita Desai, the great Indian female novelist was born in Mussoorie on 24th June, 1937, of a Bengali father and a German mother. She started her career as a writer of short stories. In writing her short stories, she "illustrated them diligently and sewed them into covers so as to make them look as proper books". She wrote her short stories for the Writers' Workshop Journal and another English Magazine called *Envoy* till her first novel was published in 1963. Anita Desai has a great collection of literary publications. Her novels are: *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices 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), *The Village By The Sea* (1982), *In Custody* (1985), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), and the latest one *Fasting, Feasting* (1999).

Her novels are different in tone and themes. She explores the sensitivity of her characters through her novels and gives a new dimension to the Indian English literature by creating poetry in prose. She was born of a German mother and an Indian father, she tries to recognise her characters fighting for their existence and identity. A close study of her novels can easily reveal the autobiographical element in her novels. She also accepts that the quality of a person's experience must reflect in his/her work also. To the question of finding subjective element in her novels, Desai says: "I think that is inevitable. The quality of one's experience must show through one's work.... As for the characters- the minor and incidental characters are also picked up from real life; I don't think any of the major characters in my books are taken from real life. They are entirely imaginary or an amalgamation of several different characters". Anita Desai gained her fame as a psychological novelist by many literary critics. She is considered as a novelist of moods, thoughts and inner conflicts of the different phases of human mind and psyche. In her interview with **JasbirJain**, the novelist also observes, "It is depth which is interesting, delving deeper and deeper in a character or scene rather than going round about it". Her characters are hypersensitive. They are entangled in the messes of life. Their sensitivity makes them live on the brink. Desai exposes their inner conflicts with their relations with one another and the world.

Her characters are the victims of their poor circumstances and disharmonious relationships, which gave rise to their inner conflicts. The novelist closely examines their mental conditions and gives an account of their biological, psychological, social, cultural and moral traits consciousness. In this connection, she admits to **JasbirJain**- "I think all human relationships are inadequate. I have never worked this out. Basically everyone is solitary. I think involvement in human relationships, in this world invariably leads to disaster".

Her characters want their freedom, their choice and they refused to compromise. They always seek their authentic existence. They run after their individuality and in this chasing, they suffer badly from a sense of alienation, unsuccessful relationships, anxiety, despair and fear of loneliness. In this connection **Madhusudan Prasad** observes: "Desai is always preoccupied by an eternal quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that can sustain us in this chaotic and seemingly meaningless world".

Anita Desai has a large number of themes to her credit. She usually deals with the themes of man-woman relationships, loneliness, lack of communication, meaninglessness, east-west encounter, violence and death. In this connection, **Ramesh KShrivastav** observes that, "Anita Desai being a house wife has chosen family relationships as her two inches of ivory". Her novels portray the complexities of human life. People's desires and restraints, guilt and innocence, tensions and evasions. She has a deep insight into the emotions of her female characters. Her novels not only explain the theory of philosophy and psychology, but they reveal her

attempt to do something for the upliftment of women, who are seen as the worst sufferers. The actions in her novels take place in the minds of her female characters.

Comprising all of her themes, her treatment of the unhappy childhood of the main characters and her portrayal of their predicaments and suffering stand unmatched and unsurpassed. Her special power of language conveys special strength in her characters.

Article

Childhood is an important phase of everyone's life and childhood memories play an important role in all of our life. Our childhood environment and upbringings shape our character and personality and our future life is related with childhood experiences. If someone suffers from an unsatisfactory childhood, he or she misses it throughout their life. They can never get rid of their childhood memories of the past. Anita Desai, in some of her novels advocates for a harmonious and hopeful future for our coming generation. Some of her female characters suffer in their life because of their unhappy childhood memories of the past. All the disturbing memories of their unhappy childhood reflect in their adult life and some of them never come out of these haunting memories. Their frustrated childhood is the root cause of their suffering. The following study of Anita Desai's novel would be apt to look at the frustrated and haunting childhood of some of her female protagonists.

Anita Desai's first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* is the story of an emotional girl Maya, who was not able to grow out of her childhood. It was impossible for Maya to live without her father. The relationship of a father and daughter is conditioned to the excess of disturbing the married life of the daughter. Maya was deprived of motherly love, so she seeks everything in her father's protection to lead her life. Her father focuses all his attention on her but he fails to provide her freedom to grow as an independent individual. He only gave her a life of protection and submission. Maya's unsuccessful married life with Gautama is the direct result of her over-protected childhood. Maya was a motherless girl, who has been an adored child of her father. Her married life with Gautama only serve to highlight her total involvement with her father. Her husband was aware of this unhappy situation as he tells Maya that she has a very strong father fixation which leads her to disillusionment and disappointment. The absence of motherly love was the root cause of Maya's tragedy. Maya's father gives a life of over protection to her. She grows up physically but her father does not provide her a chance to grow out of her childhood stage and live an independent life. To please her father was the only concern of Maya and was the cause of her anxiety. Father's loving subjugation of Maya has made her totally dependent and this dependency is the root cause of Maya's suffering. Her blind love towards her father never allows her to grow independently. Maya's relationship with her father has a negative effect on her personality and this relationship hampers her growth and freedom. Her father's blind love makes her an idle, selfish seeker of idealism, romance and perfection. She forgets all her duties and responsibilities towards her husband. Gautama is not wrong when he shouts at her:

"Neurotic, that is what you are. A spoilt baby, so spoilt she can't bear one adverse word. Everyone must bring a present for little Maya- that is what her father taught her". Maya's childhood world of fantasies clashes with the real world of her adult life and she takes recourse into the fond remembrances of her father. She leads a life of delusion and she still walks on the memory garden of childhood and dreams. Maya's sorrow and suffering is the result of a childish behaviour. Maya is a highly sensuous, erotic and appealing heroine of Anita Desai. The cause of Maya suffering lies in her excessive involvement with the sensuous beauty of life. **Meenakshi Mukherjee**, a critic also observes, "Maya is alive through all her sense and lives intensely for each moment". In this novel, Anita Desai aptly portrays the character of Maya through her psychological depth of studies. She explores the psychic problems of Maya who is on the horns of a dilemma. The present of Maya is frustrating dissatisfying and unacceptable, and the past is also not totally gratifying. In order to survive in the world of harsh reality, Maya takes refuge in the imaginary world to take full charge of her thought process. She wants to escape from the outer world, as well as from her inner fears. Thus, we find that, all through her life, Maya has seen herself from her father's eyes and as a grown-up woman she never relates herself to the reality of married life.

Anita Desai's next novel, *Voices in The City* is the tale of the sufferings and predicaments of her main female characters- Monisha and Amla and their brother Nirode. All the three children are the victims and sufferer of unhappy childhood due to the irresponsibilities and negligence of their parents. Anita Desai has portrayed the character of Monisha as a hypersensitive individual with too many emotional traits. She was trapped in an emotionally bankrupt and disturbing matrimonial relationship with her husband. Her relationships with her husband is not harmonious and is absolutely dissatisfying. All of Monisha's problems are the direct results of her frustrated childhood. At the beginning of the novel we came to know about the frustrated childhood of the four children - Nirode, Monisha, Amla and Arun and all these children are the silent sufferers of the disharmonial marital relationship of their father and mother. They have status, money, taste and intellect outwardly, but their happy home suffers from inner shortcomings and complexities in the psyche of their children.

The novel deals with the unhappy relationship between parents and children. Their mother is a complex figure who has been presented as an escapist from her responsibilities as a mother and wife. She was trapped in an extra marital relationship with a man other than her husband. She was a cold and possessive woman having no love for her children. All the children are the undone children of their parents and they withdraw themselves from the outer world and choose complete solitude. The love hate relationship of Monisha, Amla any Nirode with their mother and father makes their life journey a failure and their parents were responsible for the suffering and predicaments of their children. All of them suffer throughout their life due to their unhappy and frustrated childhood.

Anita Desai's novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is the story of Sita, who is waiting for the birth of her fifth child. As a mother and a housewife, her experiences are very painful and she suffers from the deep anguish and pain in her life. She feels that genuine happiness is not possible in her marital relationship and it is useless to hope for something good in her life. She finds her husband and children indifferent towards her nature and needs. Sita's disharmonious relationships are directly related to her ungratifying childhood. Her anxiety, nausea, isolation and unfriendliness are directly related with her isolated childhood during which she did not enjoy the blessing of a happy life. She feels her mother's absence throughout her life and suffers from a deep sense of insecurity in her life.

In her novel, *Fire On The Mountain*, Anita Desai once again focuses on the predicaments of Indian women in male dominated society and the chief protagonists of this novel are Nanda Kaul and her great-granddaughter Raka. In this novel, the novelist has portrayed the images of a middle aged woman and of a girl child. Through the character of Raka, Anita Desai tries to probe into child psychology in this novel and asserts that if a child is deprived of love and affection from her parents, he or she may turn out to be a problematic and maladjusted child. Due to her family circumstances, Rakha has developed a sense of loneliness in her life. The unfortunate relationship between her mother and father has left her insecure and isolated to face the hostility of the world. She develops a capacity to withdraw from the world and she expects nothing from this world and wants to give nothing to it. She is an ignored and forsaken child of her parents. That's why she becomes strange, lonely and mysterious by nature due to her parents' differences towards her. Children of her age are often attracted towards the beauties of existence, fairy tales, stories, flowers, butterflies and the colourful aspects of the world but Raka, on the contrary, has an imagination that is strange and she is attracted towards the mysterious places and things of nature. Due to the indifference of her father towards her mother, Raka brought up in the maladjusted family atmosphere. Her father is a diplomat and he has his affairs outside. He returns home late under the impact of liquor and makes Raka's mother a direct prey of his animal instincts. Raka's unhappy and traumatic childhood experiences has a devastating effect on her mind and she becomes an introverted child and finds no interest in childish games. There is nothing child-like in her character. Like all other women characters of Anita Desai, Raka, the young child is a victim of emotional deprivation. She becomes an irritated girl due to her embarrassing and loveless childhood.

We can take another example of an unhappy childhood from another novel by Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day*. The novel is all about two sisters of Das family, Bim and Tara, who move forward and backward in their childhood memories. Tara, the younger sister, lives with her diplomat husband Bakul and she visits her family during summer vacations. Her visit revived in her all the memories of her unhappy childhood and Bim, the elder sister, lives with her retarded brother Baba in the old decaying house of Das family in Old Delhi. Bim and Tara travel across their memories of the old house with anger, fear, involvement, guilt and repentance which is directly related with their childhood memories, their parents, their elder brother Raja, the political change in the country and their household. The novel ends up with the realisation and reconciliation. The novel is a kind of family drama covering a long period of time beginning from childhood of the Das children to their maturity and historically two periods of colonial and independent India. Through the character sketch of Bim, Anita Desai discusses in detail the unhappy childhood of the protagonist who suffers a lot from her childhood memories but does not accept any destruction. She accepts reidentification. Bim achieves her feminine self in fusion, not in fission, in association, not in alienation, in affirmation not in negation.

Her other novel, *The Village By The Sea* is the story of a poor family living in the village of Thul on sea coast. The father was an alcoholic person and the mother was an ill health woman. They have four children, they are- Hari, Leela, Kamal and Bela. Hari and Leela are the main characters in the novel and are the constant and endless sufferers of their unhappy childhood. There is no money for the purchase of books in the house and they don't eat proper food. The land of the family is sold by the father to pay their debts and all of their animals are also sold and there exists only a small area of land for them to grow vegetables. These children are the victims of their cruel fate and adverse circumstances. The novel depicts the poor conditions of the poor family who lives in adversity and in a miserable condition with helplessness and financial bankruptcy.

Thus, through the above study of Anita Desai's characters we may conclude that all these female characters suffer all through their life due to the unhappy and troublesome memories of their past. All of these women are haunted by their frustrated childhood.

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