

## Aesthetics of Feminism in The Novels of Anita Desai

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**Abstract :** *Anita Desai is a modern woman writer in Indian writing in English. A study of her works reveals that she tries to explore the psychological state of her women characters. For centuries, women in the traditional social order and system have always been considered subservient to men. The purpose of my paper is to focus on the feminist message as articulated in Anita Desai's novels, Voices in the City, Fire on the Mountain, Bye-Bye Blackbird and Cry, the Peacock. My intent is to examine how in the post- modern era Indian women writers in English have highlighted feminism. They have raised a voice against the traditional customs and gender discrimination. The themes of Anita Desai's novels are: human relationships, alienation, loneliness, violence and death. Desai represents the theme of consciousness and sensibility of women as compounded with the men .*

**Keywords:** *Indian, Feminism, modern , Women, Family.*

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The term 'feminism' has its origin from the Latin word 'femina', meaning 'woman' and thereby refers to the advocacy of women rights, status and power with men on the grounds of equality of sexes. Anita Desai seems to be aware of relationship between feminism as a political movement, a literary and theoretical commitment to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism.

Anita Desai was born in 1937 to a Bengali father and a German mother. She grew up speaking German at home and Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and English outside the house. Anita Desai started her career as a novelist with her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and her other novels are *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), *Custody* (1984) and (1988), *Diamond Dust* (2000), *The Zigzag Way* (2004). Anita Desai is a receiver of several awards in India and overseas. She is obtained many esteemed positions in India and other countries of the world. Her novel *Fire on the Mountain* awarded her the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holt by Memorial Prize and the Sahitya Akadami Award for English for the year 1978. Her *Clear Light of Day* was nominated for the 1980 Booker Prize. Again her *In Custody* was nominated for 1984 Booker Prize. *The Village by the Sea* won her the guardian award for children's fiction in 1982. In 1999, she published novel *Feasting; Feasting* was as well nominated for the covetous Booker Prize and concluded as a second best in the hot run. These heroines are driven from one condition of anxiety to another. Most of her females are neurotic. They undergo a traumatic psychic experience. Anita Desai, in each and every novel, deals with the inner climate of her female protagonist. The subject of her novels is the intricacies of human relationships, the incompatibility of marriages and inharmonious man-woman relationships.

We find varied hues of different characters in her novels eg. there is sensitive soul as Nanda (*Fire on the Mountain*), Sarah (*Bye-Bye Blackbird*), Nirode and Monisha (*Voices in the City*), unfortunate Ila (*Fire on the Mountain*), Maya (*Cry, the Peacock*). These characters are seen in our real lives. In our society, we can see a number of characters identical to Maya, Monisha, Nanda and Sara. Anita Desai is essentially a sincere writer engaged in probing reality. As a woman, she is capable of understanding woman's psyche better than the male writers. This can be seen in her portrayal of women characters in her novels with a rare insight and fineness of sentiment. The characters of Anita Desai's novels are basically tragic for even as they accept their destiny, they refuse to surrender. Apart from their temperamental aloofness, the outside forces, such as the city, nature and family play major roles in making them tragic. Anita Desai is the novelist of the inner weather of

the mind. An uncanny ability to probe into the recesses of the heart is her forte. *Voices in the City* is a crystal evidence of her inward sensibility. It is also one of her novels that clearly visualizes the inner sense of a married woman, who live in an entirely relocated surrounding and environment. Anita Desai is considered as an inner psychological novelist as her prime concern is mingled with the nocturnal and nebulous atmosphere of the women's psyche.

In *Voices in the City* Anita Desai's portrayal of Monisha makes her the most sensitive and the most poetic of all the characters in the novel. She is not very talkative by nature. She is a sensitive woman and cannot understand the taboos of tradition.

Monisha arrives at the ancestral house of Jiban. It is a joint family of large size that welcomes her in the traditional manner. Monisha suffers from a terrible sense of alienation. Attending on her brother Nirode, who is seriously ill, Monisha has many occasions to muse on the meaning of existence. His illness, gives her many chances to leave the house. She does not speak much in the company of Nirode. Monisha is always surrounded by her in-laws. She gets bored with that environment. She wants space. Her in laws don't care that daughter-in-law may need some privacy. Without any hesitation, they open the wardrobe and see:

'No, no, the doctor has said it is not the womb.

It is these tubes, what d' you call them, Fallopian or Pallopien,  
what is it – they are blocked'An operation ?'

'The womb may be in the wrong position, then also an operation is required.'

'But it is the tubes, they are blocked.'( p 113)

Monisha feels that her feelings are disintegrating in the company of her-in-laws. She searches love in her married life which no longer exist there. She writes in her dairy:

"I see now that both Nirode and I shy from love fear  
it as attachment, for 'from attachment arises longing....'  
If only love existed that is not binding, that is free of rules,  
obligations ,complicity and all stirring of mind or conscience,  
then – but there is no such love.(p 134)

Monisha does not find life authentic. She wants that love in her life which is not binding. But she cannot find that type of love. So she feels sad and that is the reason why she is afraid of love. She is in contrast with Bengali women who sacrifice their life for the husbands. If Monisha changes herself and becomes like them, she

will live a happy life. Bengali women spend their lives in waiting for their husbands. They die in the old houses in the old cities. Their death makes no difference for any one. But Monisha does not want to live such a life. I see many women, always Bengali women who follow five paces behind their men.....and I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the *Bhagvad Gita* and the *Ramayana* in the dim light of sooty lamps. Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centered, indifferent and hungry.....waiting for death....in the old houses in the city.(p120)

*Fire on the Mountain* deals with isolation and loneliness in the life of an old widow. Nanda Kaul lives in Carignano, in Kasauli. She is living a lonely life. She does not want any interference in her life. Nanda Kaul has lived a busy but empty life. She always remained busy in doing her household duties. But what she gets in return is her husband's disloyalty as he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David. In our society, no married man loves any unmarried girl. He loves David against social sanctions. This type of illegal love is not allowed in Indian culture.

Violence and death form an aspect of the theme of loneliness in *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai exploits the situation of Ila's rape and murder and Nanda's death to highlight problems that confront women in the male society. Exploration of this theme is the central focus of the novel. In the case of Ila, we see the male cruelty. She is working for a noble cause. Preet Singh rapes Ila. Here rape is an act of vengeance. It was the only revenge that Preet Singh could inflict on Ila who had interfered in the matter of his seven years old daughter's marriage to an old man. He worked to humiliate Ila for the injury she had caused to his male ego:

Just then a black shape detached itself from the jagged pile of the rock .....and sprang soundlessly at her. She staggered under its weight with a gasp that ripped through her chest. It had her by her throat. She struggled, choking, trying to stretch and stretch that gasp till it became a shout, a shout that the villagers would hear, the red dog would hear, a shout for help.....It was Preet Singh, his lips lifted back from his teeth, his eyes blazing down at her in rage, in a passion of rage.

In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, novelist treats the theme of frustration and loneliness which an individual feels in a foreign land. The working out of Sarah-Adit marriage,

the usual dull routine of cooking, washing, dishes and keeping the house clean. Both are different in their tastes, likes, dislikes and attitudes. Adit makes Sarah cook Indian food straight away after their marriage. She cooks Indian food without developing a taste for it. Both of them have difficulty in adjusting to each other's concept of hygiene and cleanliness. Adit shows in his character, the typical trait of male superiority and female subordination. As he remarks:

“These English wives are quite manageable really, You know.  
Not as fierce as they look – very quiet and hardworking as long as  
You treat them right and roar at there gularly once or twice a week.”(p31)

Adit always enjoys his friend's company. But Sarah cannot join them in conversation. She remains a foreigner in their company. Adit enjoys the jokes and laughter whereas Sarah is left to pick up empty cups and glasses. Having been married to Adit, Sarah loses her identity. Sarah becomes a stranger in her own chosen world. But she regains on hearing the decision of going back to India. She wishes to find her lost identity there. It is just like a dream come true for her.

A particular trace and trait in the women's characterization, a tragic downfall turns into a psychic malady making them mentality over neurotic and hysterical as Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*. Desai's fictions are auto-biographical, in the sense they impact her silent temperament.

Prof. K. R. S. Iyengar says: “*Cry, the Peacock* scores because Maya is at once the centre and circumference in this world. Her insanity, sane or insane fills the whole book and gives it form as well as life.” (16). *Cry, the peacock* is Maya's story, of married life with Gautama and almost the entire story is ‘remembrance of things past’ by Maya herself. Anita Desai makes clear that feelings of love should be satisfied according to the rule. She surprises the readers by the neurotic behaviour of her heroine Maya. Maya feels that her integrity is dissolving under the pressure of so many things. Maya's husband is lawyer and he remains busy with his work. Maya's demand for love is explicit. Maya desires to lead a contented life. She wants to enjoy all the pleasure that a marriage offers. But her longing for all these pleasures remain unfulfilled of her husband. When Maya wishes:

‘I want –want....to see the kathakali dances. I have heard of the ballets they have in their villages. They say they go on for days and days! And the dancers are all the men, and they wear such fantastic masks. And the drums.....I thought you would being interested in that, too –more

than in the hills, and pony rides and things. It must be such a marvelous sight, so –violent, and –bizarre.’ (p 40)

Maya complains that Gautama does not take her outside. She wants to go with her husband. She is shy. Gautama does not like this. He hates her for shyness. Their unfulfilled desires turn into quarreling. She always feels sad. Maya is eager for her husband’s love. She is living fragmentary life with her husband. She expects her husband to do things for her. Gautama is a busy lawyer and has no time for these things. He doesn’t tread on the path of life along with her. Maya feels unsettled even after four years of marriage; Gautama had failed to fecundate, “no you are too young” —. She puts entire blame on her husband for her suffering. For her, life is a game in which one will win and the other must lose. She starts thinking that Gautama is only obstacles in the way of her happiness. Gautama tries to make understand that life is not a fairy tale. He thinks that her desires are absurd. Maya fancies that her married life is short. Maya says: “Oh if you do, if you say you do, it means nothing. Love has no importance for you. It is merely attachment, and I spat out that treacherous betraying, hastening it.” Though unconsciously, she probably wishes to kill her husband and remove him from her life. Ultimately she does, what she always desired, that she kills her husband. Anita Desai, in her first novel gives the right to her protagonist to blame the males for her miserable plight.

The novel concludes with the death of Maya. The mental retrogression proposes that Maya was not been able to adapt herself to the world of fact and after killing her husband, she mentally gets back of her secure and ruined childhood. So in the role of Maya, Anita Desai has showed the feminine mind of both a girl and a woman. The issue of female, a hot subject in feminism, is addressed by Anita Desai with sensitiveness.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, we may say that Anita Desai’s treatment of women characters looks at the past to anatomize the pain inflicted on women in the past and present in passionate affirmation of female identity & experience. She expresses a unique Indian sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the west. Anita Desai’s different novels have been written on different themes. But one thing that is common in all her novels under consideration here is marriage misalliance. Her males are not dominant but insensitive and practical persons. They battle for equality of women rights historically & politically. They stress on the esteem of females in the fellowship. Finally, we can say that sensibility of Indian women is bound to institutions and practices, civilization and culture.

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