

## DIMENSIONS OF ALIENATION IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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### ABSTRACT

*Man's existence cannot be imagined without social interaction as he is a social animal. Globalization, materialism and technological advancements have certainly produced luxuries and comforts, but they have simultaneously made the man deplorably alienated and isolated as well as uprooted from the very basics of social and human values. Anita Desai being very sensitive and conscious of the existentialist concerns has explored the inner sensibilities of her characters by delving deep into their psyche and emotional make up. She has unveiled the pain, the frustration and the loneliness of her women characters in this insensitive and inconsiderate world. This research paper proposes to study the distinctive aspects of solitariness and alienation which have become the core of human existence now. It will also take into consideration how the feelings of loneliness of their characters take the form of physical and emotional separation leading to their psychic solitariness.*

**Key Words:** *Globalization, Alienation, Loneliness, Dislocations, Paranoia, Dystopia.*

Modern civilization with all its blisses and curses has struck at the very roots of human sociability. Man's existence cannot be imagined without social interaction as he has been a social animal. Globalization, materialism and technological advancement have made him a churning machine to produce luxuries and glamour of life but they have simultaneously made him deplorably alienated and uprooted from the very basics of social and human values. 'The sick hurry and divided aims' of modern civilization have hollowed him both spiritually and socially resulting in alienation and solitariness. It is not that the theme of alienation has not been taken up in literature before but it has certainly become a major concern in the twentieth century writings. Samuel Beckett, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson are some few names who have aesthetically expressed the nature of alienation through their writings. They have opened a new chapter of psychological realism in the field of novels and their mode of writing has influenced a host of writers across the world. Anita Desai being no exception has provided a new dimension to Indian English fiction and explored the inner sensibilities of her characters by unravelling the pain, frustration and loneliness of people in this insensitive, inconsiderate and materialistic world. It is by going through her novels one comes across distinctive aspects of solitariness and alienation which have become the core of human existence. The feeling of loneliness enters in the form of physical and emotional separation and

disillusionment which eventually lead to psychic solitariness. Anita Desai has vividly described various dimensions of alienation including the clash between psychic demands and external reality which forms the root of their existential problematic concerns. For her,

“ the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that lures or clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightning, is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action”.<sup>1</sup>

Her characters alienate themselves in order to preserve their own individuality and then to indulge in self-deceiving fantasies. Another form of alienation comes in the feeling of exile and in the problems of immigrants. Lost and drifting characters appear to keep on dwindling in an era of technological advancement and global interaction. Man has become an exile because of economic, political and geographical dislocations. The impact of ‘cultural shock’ disturbs the individual psyche and pushes the immigrants into the world of complexities. Absence from one’s own country and maladjustment in another are the situations skilfully explored by Anita Desai who has viewed life as a whole with all its ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’. She has portrayed the issues which have left sensitive individuals repressed, alienated and dissatisfied.

Anita Desai’s novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, dazzled the literary world and proved to be a trend setter by exploring the psychic realities of the character. Maya, a hyper sensitive woman, feels physically and mentally divorced from her middle aged pragmatic and rational husband Gautama. Maya lives in a world of fantasy, lost in beautiful memories of hers, which makes it difficult for her to adjust with present reality. Gautama is so much engrossed in his own work that there is no time left for his wife. Negligence of Gautama for Maya is visible in her cry:

“Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed”.<sup>2</sup>

The anguished mind of Maya pushes her into the dark corridors of alienation. She is frustrated at the cold attitude of Gautama. Her sexual dissatisfaction worsens her situation with each passing day. Gautama did not welcome any kind of interruption in his work. Even Maya informs him of the death of their pet dog, Toto, which he considers a trivial matter. Maya is a childless woman who has an immense attachment with her pet, and Gautama being very much aware of her intimacy ignored her feelings and did not share her grief. His psychological absence from Maya, despite his physical presence, is quite clear in the following lines:

“His coldness, his coldness and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order to not to hear me talk, and talking reveal myself. It is that- My loneliness in this house.”<sup>3</sup>

Maya's loneliness is the outcome of her excessive love and expectations from her counterpart. Her disillusionment with the basic realities of the metropolis drags her into a stage of alienation which makes her life a living hell. Anita Desai has aesthetically projected the ever widening gap between the two. Gautama's indifferent response makes her an agonizing creature that starts looking for companionship in nature which again, in turn, heightens her sense of loneliness.

Anita Desai's second novel, *Voices in the City*, deals with the struggle of men and women in the city of Calcutta striving for a higher life of conscience and values. One of the female characters, Monisha is the victim of a suffocated and lonely married life with Jiban, an insensitive being. She is forced to live in her own little world which makes her depressed and helpless in every way. The plight of her meaningless existence, craving for companionship, is perceptible in the lines cited below:

"One must have someone who reciprocates, who responds. One must have that-reciprocation-I think."<sup>4</sup>

Her psychological distance with Jiban leaves her with emptiness, devoid of any kind of love and compatibility. She chooses death as her ultimate destiny and a way to escape from this imposed alienation. The inner climate of Monisha's sensibility has been artistically expressed in this novel. The boredom and loneliness which she went through is not just the story of Monisha but that of millions of women in general who are striving to attain the self-satisfaction.

Anita Desai's next novel, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, too, focuses on the conjugal life of Adit and Sarah facing the problems of adjustment with each other's culture. Adit, an Indian, who is settled in England, has not been fully accepted there and his better half, Sarah, an English, feels alienated from her own native culture after getting married to Adit. Migration of Indians to the lucrative abundance of west is a common thing. The adaptation to the western culture or alien culture is a hard nut to crack. The novelist through her two above mentioned characters has portrayed immigrant sensibilities. Initially, people admire and get fascinated by the alien culture but gradually they feel estranged from hostile environment. The consequences of cultural shock push them into alienation from anything around them. The hypnotic charm suddenly fades away and eventually disappears from their minds. After suffering rejection at the hands of her own people, Sarah feels 'parading like an imposter, to make claims to a life, an identity that she did not herself feel to be her own'.<sup>5</sup> The anguished and forced sense of guilt withdrew her from her parents too. She is subjected to the taunts and jibes of her own colleagues. England has certainly given Adit economic freedom, his English wife and British citizenship, but his life is in fact devoid of emotions and happiness which he could get from his native culture. A few years later, he feels home sick and realises humiliation that was being forced on him by English life. Sarah tries to adjust to Adit's Indian way of life, but she, too, feels alienated. Her fear of losing identity is quite clear in the following lines.

“An anguish it seemed to her loneliness and then it becomes absurd to call her by her own name - to call her by any name. She had become nameless, she had shed her ancestry and identity and she sat there staring as though she watched then disappear”.<sup>6</sup>

Sarah does not give up and strives to come out of this alienated feeling. Eventually, she opts to leave England and go to India with her husband.

Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer* deals with marital incompatibility between Raman and Sita. They are a contrast to mythical Ram and Sita who are a symbol of the perfection of husband-wife relations, oneness, love, tolerance and sacrifice to every Indian. In this hard materialistic world, Sita no more possesses the qualities of tolerance and compassion, and Raman has no time to go after his wife or lamenting for separation from him. Their conjugal life is unstable and gets much more deplorable with each passing day. They both have different perceptions and carry temperamental polarities which results in a discord between the two. Sita finds her life monotonous and dull gets fed up with the routine life. Her counterpart, Raman, quite pragmatic and materialistic, is very much busy with his own stuffs. Sita's predicaments and their marital disharmony are clinically portrayed by the novelist.

“.....she could not believe that he had really believed all was not well, not knowing that she was bored, dull, and unhappy, she could hardly believe that although they live so close together, he did not even know this basic fact of her existence”.<sup>7</sup>

Sita feels disgusted with everything that life has offered her. The lack of love, tenderness and care of Raman makes her a troubled creature fighting with her own alienated self. Sita wants to escape from her present reality. Lack of communication with Raman and his indifferent attitude push her into the abyss of boredom. Their marital polarization results in her alienation and detachment from life. Her loneliness is symbolic of the loneliness of a woman, a wife, a mother - the loneliness conditioned by familial and social constraints.

Anita Desai's next novel *Fire on the Mountain*, which brought her Sahitya Akademi award of 1978, highlights the forced alienation of Nanda Kaul and the secluded life of Raka, her great granddaughter. Raka's childhood has been devoid of love and affection. The traumatic experiences of her home, always watching parents fighting and blaming each other, and their uncared attitude towards Raka moulded her personality in such a way that she started living alone in her little world.

“Raka wanted only one thing- to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli”.<sup>8</sup>

The lines by Nanda Kaul for Raka are a perfect example of Desai's mastery over language. Raka is a victim of a broken home which made her the way she is. Nanda Kaul is a lonely and silenced

creature, confined within the cyclic parameters of home-womb-tomb. Her loneliness leads her to sickness of soul, where she made herself detached from every emotion. The neglect which she suffered in the family made her shift to Carignano. So, 'She did not live here alone by choice- she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do- reduced to doing'.<sup>9</sup>

She was scared to get more harshness and pain from the outside world. So, to avoid that torment, she decided to spend the rest of her life in the aloof atmosphere of Kasauli without any interference. The distinctive aspects of alienation in this novel by Anita Desai are remarkably explicated in these lines.

"If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life, out of duty and obligation, her great grand-daughter was a recluse by nature. She did not arrive at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice- she was born to it simply".<sup>10</sup>

Nanda's rejection of life was planned and then executed whereas it came naturally to Raka. Despite their dislike for each other they both share similarities. They both wanted to be alone. Nanda Kaul craved for aloofness and Raka enjoyed solitude in the silence of nature.

Desai's later novel, *Baumgartner's Bombay* widened her thematic horizons. This novel of hers focuses on the struggle of Hugo Baumgartner who suffers from imposed homelessness. The characters of Anita Desai are not merely the product of her imagination, but she was a keen observer of people around her also. Hugo's character is modelled by her on a real person, an Austrian Jew, whom Anita Desai knew through a friend of hers. She had letters of this Jew which contained his experiences in concentration camps. Desai picked up this real character and filled up the blank spaces with her creative skills. Hugo was a native German, later on he came to India to start a new life. He is confronted with the dilemmas of human existence. In Germany, he was a member of 'sub human race', and termed as 'hostile alien' in India. Social non-acceptance creates havoc in his mind which ultimately leads him to the feeling of alienation. Physical appearance and alien language enhance the psychological distance. His condition has been aesthetically expressed by Anita Desai in the lines:

"Accepting- but not accepted; this was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been dark- his darkness had marked him the Jew. In India he was fair- and that marked him firangi. In both lands, the unacceptable".<sup>11</sup>

Hugo was a 'nowhere man' wandering and unsettled all his life with his wounded self. Desai has vividly explored his pathetic rootlessness. He finds himself 'unbelonged' to the society and people. He is unable to communicate with the locals of both the countries. An alien in his own place and abandoned by his own country he started his journey from 'nowhere' and ended up 'nowhere'. The linguistic estrangement results in his failure of establishing a rapport with social milieu, and pushes him in solitariness on the Indian soil. The remark by Elaine clarifies Hugo's situation.



“India is kept at bay; for a long time, it shows little interest in either penetrating or disallowing the ‘boundary’ Baumgartner draws for himself. Reticent among the riches of the language that surrounds him, Baumgartner has renegotiated his alienation from Europe as the condition of his survival as an alien in India”.<sup>12</sup>

Her next novel *Fasting, Feasting* deals with the plight of an unattractive and isolated girl, Uma, whose life is full of unfulfilled desires and frustrations. She is forced to confine herself within the four walls of the house, living her life meekly and dancing to the tunes of her parents’ wishes. Being a docile and submissive creature, she is made to suffer her pain lonely. She had to sacrifice even her studies for the sake of her younger brother. Her mother remarks: ‘We are not sending you back to school, Uma. You are staying at home to help’.<sup>13</sup> She is an alienated individual with no one to share her feelings. The feelings of an exile are also explicated in the novel through Arun’s experience in America.

“It was first time in his life away from home, away from Mama Papa, his sisters, the neighbourhood of old bungalows, dusty gardens- he had at last experienced the total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relations, demands, needs, requests, ties, responsibilities, commitments. He was Arun. He had no past, no family and no country”.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of the efforts on the part of an immigrant to adjust in an alien country, he is overtaken by the feeling of homesickness. The novelist’s concern with the revelation of human psyche is aesthetically projected in the novel.

Desai’s psychic delineation of her characters is remarkably excellent. She has focussed on the alienated consciousness of characters suffering from the dilemmas of human predicament. The feeling of unwantedness is the root cause of aloofness which drags people in to the dark corridors of loneliness and isolation. Anita Desai has explored the feelings of alienated individuals on the psychological as well as the physical level. The feeling of anguish, pain, anger, detachment, aloofness and frustration crucially complicate an alienated person and make his life a living hell. The theme has been the forte of Anita Desai’s novels which she has presented with her brilliant skill and mastery over language. The inner conflict of her characters has been successfully portrayed in her novels. The failure to adjust with what life has offered is her main thematic concern. The inability to decide, where to go, what to accept and refuse makes people confused and entangled. This indecisiveness leads them in their solitary world where they find no one to care and share. The developing tendencies of fear psychosis, paranoia, inferiority-complex, amnesia and dystopia are manifestations of alienation. This detachment further drags them to self-hate, self-persecution, isolation and disconnectedness from the inner and outer world. Anita Desai with her variegated experiences has successfully presented them as strangers belonging to nowhere.

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