

DEPICTION OF 'ALIENATION AND SECLUSION' IN THE SHORT STORIES OF ANITA DESAI

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Anita Desai belongs to a new literary custom of Indian writing in English, which dates back to the 30's or 40's. She elucidates that this is because at one time all literature was recited rather than read and that continues to be the tradition in India. After her marriage in 1958 she started publishing her works. Desai has won numerous awards, including the 1978 Nation Academy of Letters Award for Fire on the Mountain, Guardian Prize for Children's Fiction in 1983 for '*The Village by the sea*' and the literary Lion Award in 1993.

Anita Desai is recognized for her studies of Indian life. All her literary works, be it her novels, children's books or short stories, focus on personal hardships and tribulations of existing life that her Indian characters must survive with. Desai is endowed with the power of observation, intense sensitiveness combined with an equally acute penetrating analytical mind. She plays with words to create a range of characters both male and female. But it is her female characters who she savours more. She holds wide acclamation for her studies of Indian Life and acknowledged as a keen observer of human race. She superbly presents the concoction of western and eastern cultures in the country and is known for her eclectic discernment of academic issues.

Desai's short stories very often act as mirrors of the social conditions but her great ascendancy is to assemble and isolate the psycho space of her characters under some interesting situations of life. She herself says states that her interest is not in,

"The one tenth visible section of the iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean," instead her interest is in "the remaining nine – tenths of it that lie below the surface" (Jasbir Jain, "Replies to the Questionnaire" 1978 : 1) Her approach is further explained in an interview to Jasbir Jain when Desai tells her that her purpose is to delve

"deeper and deeper in a character or a scene, rather than going round about it." (Jasbir Jain, "Anita Desai Interviewed," 1979: 63) Therefore her foremost concern is for the thought processes, consciousness and the motives of

her characters rather than their extraneous socio-philosophical ideas. Thus, each of Desai's characters is marked by a distinct feature. They are not very cordial but lost in the world of their own. Desai does not pick her characters from the real life but they are either "entirely imaginary or an amalgamation of several different characters" (*Ibid*: 68) formed by her experience, memory and above all imagination. She has an inclination for characters having potential of interesting psycho space as she is more fascinated with the portrayal of the psychological reality which she likes to map out. Therefore the ordinary characters with mere survival problems fail to find a place in her choice of characters. Thus angularity, peculiarity or eccentricity is what the writer is sighting for. She herself spells out her choice;

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with current,, it makes no demand , it costs no efforts. But those...who fight the currentknow what the demands are and what it costs to meet them." (Yashodhara Dalmia, "An Interview with Anita Desai," : xxxviii)

Thus she chooses characters both in her novels and short stories with her eyes on their psychographs. She equips her protagonists with an outstanding quality not to be found in daily life. Anita Desai's technique comprehends her choice of characters. As she brings out the inner self of her characters the language need not to be descriptive as it is best communicated through images and symbols. Therefore Desai's stories as well as her novels abound in rich and symbolic images of light and color and the cosmic elements like the sun, the moon, birds, insects and animals. This use of imagery brings to the surface the interior of the character, along with their obsessions, mood variations and psychic aberrations. They simultaneously contribute to the atmosphere of the stories.

Desai's endeavor is to acquaint her readers with the tension between convention and

exploration on one hand and family solidarity and individualism on the other which is evident in *'Game at Twilight'*. This is why her protagonists, do not fit in any particular class, but they are individuals. Mr. Basu in *'Pigeons at Daybreak'*, Ravi in *'Games at Twilight'*, the student in *'Studies in the Park'*, Pat in *'Scholar and Gypsy'*, the artist in *'Sale'*, and Mr. Varma in *'A Devoted Son'*, are all such protagonists. They are intensely individual characters who aim for the uncontested and ready to put everything at risk be it their fame or wealth. They do not want to be ranked among any Tom Dick and Harry but to create an identity of their own and therefore are easily discernible among the masses.

According to Desai literature is essentially a search and an inquest rather than a means of evading or of portraying socio-political, religious or moral ideas. Her idea is to make the inner- self of her characters transparent to the readers. Therefore Desai doesn't use her fictional works as a vehicle to deliver messages or to teach lessons. Her effort is to present the 'inside out' instead of the more accessible surface reality. It requires an acute power of observation in order "to pick up the tiny details others might not notice." (Jasbir Jain, "Anita Desai Interviewed," : 63) She confesses in the same disposition:

"I do restrict myself to writing about people and situations I know or can understand, Yes, this is the reason for my emphasis on 'inner action.'" (Ramash K. Shrivastava, "Anita Desai at Work: An interview": 211) That is why writing for her is "an intellectual exercise" (*Ibid*, p. 209) because only in that account the inner self may be palpably felt.

Anita Desai has addressed a wide variety of problems prevalent in the urban society which is evident from her thematic concerns. If Temperamental difference is the theme of *"Scholar and Gypsy"*, misery of a talented artist is portrayed in *"Sale"*. *"The Accompanist"* depicts the devotion of the pupil while *"Private Tuition"* gives an insight into psychology of a poor teacher the psychology of a precious child forms the subject of *"Games at Twilight"*. In *"Pigeons of the Daybreak"* the psychological states of a valetudinarian are presented while *"Surface Textures"* studies the psychology of a man whose low spirits lead to evasiveness and escapism. *"A Devoted Son"* on one hand presents the attitudinal contrast of generations, whereas on the other hand *"The Farewell party"* studies the sentimental people.

"Royalty" records the boredom of retired life after hectic life of parties and social gatherings and *"Winterscape"* is Anita Desai's response to the vexed problems of East-West Encounter.

Apart from these 'Art and Artistic' process also holds a prominent place in Desai's themes. Desai attempts to comprehend answer to various queries such as- What does an artist think and feel? How does he create such wonderful piece of art? And finally -What makes an artist different from others? Her stories bring out the fact that 'imagination' is the chief quality that differentiates an artist from a common man. In the story *'Sale'* the painter generates pictures of birds and terrain, which he has never perceived. While in *'Accompanist'* the accompanist imagines the whole world gyrate around his sitar. Whereas Harish in *'Surface Textures'* feels the surface of things around him and tries to decipher the meaning of life with his imagination and gets spiritually transformed.

Anita Desai is one of those writers who portray the whole nation as a 'home' and parting from this home leads to isolation. So she has been very much concerned with the theme of desolation and seclusion. Her characters display a strong yearning for being loved and cared. She meticulously brings out the dilemmas faced by people living in other countries. *'Diamond Dust'* and *'Games at Twilight'* are her two collections of short stories. Where she depicts how people yearn for settling down in a foreign land. Though they may get all sorts of luxuries, fame and accomplishments abroad, however fail to find a meaning in life and a sense of security. Apart from this they suffer from the acute pain of loneliness and seclusion. They experience a dilemma, neither can they feel ones with the country to which they have migrated nor can they revive the relationship with their family members whom they have left behind and feel alienated now. They feel as if they are caught in the middle and suffer from a sense of rootlessness and alienation.

Diamond Dust is Deshpande's latest richly diverse collection of short stories through which she exposes the various paradox of daily life. She depicts her characters entangled in and being shaped by their contagious surroundings. Each setting be it a family compound in Mexico, a perilous and fascinating rooftop apartment in Delhi or a Massachusetts suburb is strikingly chalked out, where the character are depicted struggling against his or her state, like flies in a spider's

web. Desai focuses her attention on exposing the private cosmos distended from India to New England, or from Cornwall to Mexico, skillfully charting the fault lines between social compulsions and personal accountabilities.

In 'Winterscape', two sisters Anu and Asha who become widows at a very early age acutely suffer the pain of separation and loneliness. Both these sisters become widows at a very young age and devote their entire life to the upbringing of Anu's son, Rakesh. For further studies, Rakesh leaves for Canada where he builds a career and gets married. When a son is born to him both Anu and Asha visit him. Rakesh' feeling of alienation to these women is shown who have given up everything to bring him up. Here Desai delves into psyche of Rakesh who is caught in a tug-of-war between mixed feelings. He can neither feel rooted in country to which he has migrated nor can he relate himself to his relatives. Their presences suffocate him, at the same time, he feels uncomfortable when they leave his place and return to India.

In the title story, Mr. Das a New Delhi bureaucrat is obsessed with his dog who he calls Daimond. The dog proves to be devil for the family and others who are constantly harassed by it. But for Mr. Das this dog is his only consolation in this world and he feels secluded from the rest.

In the story entitled 'The Man Who Saw Himself Drown' the misery of a soul, of a businessman is shown who away from his home sees his own death. The soul suffers due to desolation after parting from the body. He tries to escape from the lamentation of his family as their mourning is unbearable for him. Here Desai uses the technique of surrealism to present her views. The soul is a metaphor, representing all those who have migrated to foreign lands and thus feel alienated to their family and friends who they have left behind. They try to avoid this feeling of separation experienced by both, them and their counterparts in their homeland.

In another story 'A Rooftop Dwellers' Desai delineates the homesickness and loneliness of people who for the sake of career building have to leave their home. Moyna is such a character who for her job has moved to Delhi and has rented a room at the rooftop. She expects security and warmth from her landlord but on the contrary is rewarded with theft and suspicion. The rooftop is symbolic of the

feeling of elevation experienced by those who have settled abroad. Thus, Desai clearly pinpoints at the diasporic experience. But in spite of their achievements they fail to find any meaning in life and are constantly gripped by feeling of insecurity and home sickness.

In her story 'Royalty', Desai shows cases the 'royal' status accorded to the foreign-returned persons in India. They are held in high esteem by people and yield domination over others. In the story an old friend who returns from a foreign land is looked with great admiration and respect and he dominates his friends' lives. All try to appease and even flatters him. He holds every one's attraction, they gather round him to listen to his stories. The alienation between the husband and wife Sarla and Ravi is depicted. They after acquaintance marry in London. Ravi proceeded to ambassadorial service while Sarla reaps the privileges attributed to her husband's position. But she is warmer to Raja, a south Indian with a silver-tongued tongue who could attract attention by his intelligent locution while Sarla and her sister were students in England. The alienation between the two is evident in the opening paragraph. As Sarla was ready for her summer exodus to the cool hills Raja's letter arrives which is read by Sarla. Here Desai tellingly underlines the temperamental alienation.

Desai's another short story 'Five Hours to Simla' or 'Faisla' deals with confusion and suffering of the people stuck up on their way to Simla. In it a truck driver alleges that a stone has been thrown on his truck. He in his fit of rage blocks the road by parking his vehicle right in the middle of the road thus blocking the road on both sides of the road. All people get stranded and have to bear the scorching heat of the sun. They feel stuck up in the middle and eager to reach their destination and have their dinner and rest. This feeling is also very much found in the people who migrate to other countries.

While in the story 'The Artists Life' Desai has dealt with the solitude and deftly handles the issue of alienation. Polly is a small girl who aspires to be an artist. But she receives no support or inspiration from her friends. This lack of encouragement thwarts the potential of the lonesome artist. This feeling is very prominent here.

Desai in the story 'Tepoztlan Tomorrow', depicts the peaceful life of the citizens. They are the denizens of a natural landscape. Tepoztlan is paradise for them. But their

serenity is disturbed as due to the development of tourism, the hills and the streams are exposed to pollution. They long for restoration of peace and a live in harmony with the elements of Nature. The citizens therefore start a revolution to get rid of these disturbances. Here Desai portrays the constant shuffling of people to other countries and places which has led to too much of chaos, disharmony and disturbances in the life's of other people.

Thus, we observe Desai peeps into self of people who have migrated to other lands and are craving for love, tenderness and geniality of the homeland. Desai is also adept in exploring the theme of the tension between tradition and hunt. This is her central preoccupation in her short story anthology *Games at Twilight* published by Vintage 1988. The characters in this compilation get bored with the dry and tedious life around them and seek something hitherto uncharted, unchallenged. This quest is the chief concern of the author.

In the title story, Ravi is in search of such a hiding place where no one else has ever hidden. While in 'Private Tuition' Mr. Bose, wishes to evade the monotonous life of tutoring his students. The students in 'Students in Park' comprehend the worthlessness of getting degrees and certificates and instead draw towards observation and elucidation human nature and conduct. Whereas Pat in 'Scholar and Gypsy' declines to socialize with people in India and become popular like, her husband. She desires neither money nor fame but prefers to live a minimal life in the mountains totally dedicated to meditation. The relationship between pat and David is another fine example of Anita Desai's method of handling her favourite theme of husband-wife discord and alienation. Pat has the assessment that her marriage with David has been an incongruity and thus liable for alienation. So

the events become streamlined. Pat just falls short of the academic echelon of David and is eventually in the Himachal hills. She goes over to the band of hippies and David returns home without the Gypsy girl he had married in the anticipation of having her by his side in the lonely hours of academic quests.

Desai have a propensity to concentrate on activities from which people usually decline. In the endless pursuit for wealth and popularity they lose sense for so many things and incompetent to feel and experience various emotions. She has depicted how people have an insatiable thirst for proceeding to and colonize in foreign land. However they fail to find a sense of security and import in life in spite of all luxuries that they may attain there. They cannot feel rooted in the new land and are deprived of something that is invaluable, and that is self-understanding and contentment. Thus though glaring like a diamond in the beginning their quest proves to be worthless as its dust in the end.

Works Cited

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